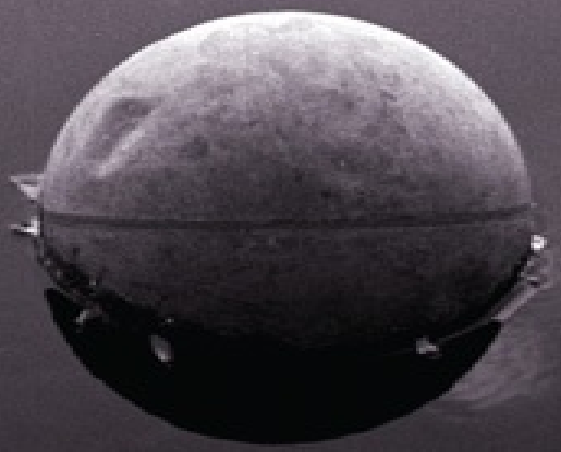
STORE OF THE WORLDS
THE STORIES OF ROBERT SHECKLEY

EDITED BY
ALEX ABRAMOVICH AND JONATHAN LETHEM



ROBERT SHECKLEY (1928–2005) was born in New York City and raised in Maplewood, New Jersey. He joined the army shortly after high school and served in Korea from 1946 to 1948. Returning to New York, Sheckley completed a BA degree at New York University and later took a job in an aircraft factory, leaving as soon as he was able to support himself by selling short stories. In the 1950s and ’60s his stories appeared regularly in science-fiction magazines, especially *Galaxy*, as well as in *Playboy* and *Esquire*. In addition to the science fiction for which he is best known, Sheckley also wrote suspense and mystery stories and television screenplays; from 1979 to 1982 he was the fiction editor of *Omni* magazine. Sheckley traveled widely, settling for stretches of time in Greenwich Village, Ibiza, London, and Portland, Oregon. Many of Sheckley’s more than fifteen novels and roughly four hundred short stories have been translated and four have been adapted for film. In 2001 he was named Author Emeritus by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

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STORE OF THE WORLDS

The Stories of

ROBERT SHECKLEY

Edited and with an introduction by

ALEX ABRAMOVICH and

JONATHAN LETHEM

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INTRODUCTION

THE LITERARY annals, in the rare moments they're kind enough to glance at a few of the millions of stories and novels racing away in the rearview mirror, tend to blur context. This is largely a blessing. In advocating for a forgotten or neglected writer, best simply to raise the curtain and say: This is worth your time. For instance, these stories; Robert Sheckley's little sculptures in syntax emanate a magnetism that still rewards curiosity. They stand up. You ought to read them. Yet once on board, a reader may wonder: Who wrote this stuff? What makes these stories so completely the way they are, instead of some other way?

Ask about the life of Robert Sheckley, and you'll find out he came from somewhere and ended up in a few other places; he lived among human beings and loved and hated more than a few; he practiced a difficult trade, with difficulty; he attempted things he wasn't quite able to do, and mastered some other things not quite worth doing. The personal details are particular, and par for the course. Sheckley also, along the way, wrote more than his share of stories that refuse to go out of your mind once you've allowed them to enter. By "refuse to go out of your mind" we mean in the sense of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" or Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" or George Saunders's "Pastoralia" or John Cheever's "The Swimmer" or Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt" or Bernard Malamud's "The Jewbird." That is to say, specifically in the sense of stories standing outside "the realist tradition," and which seem to form a tradition of their own, however difficult to define except in words charting this distance from the familiar—"surrealist," "antirealist," "fabulist"—and which contain little descriptive power of their own.

Sheckley's stories operate as irresistible language artifacts, like extended puns or paradoxes: off-kilter, provocative, unsettling even if partly silly. They're like psychedelic lamps that cast an eerie light in one room where they're encountered, but then turn out to transform one's view of all subsequent rooms. These are the kind of stories which, if young or otherwise inattentive at first encounter, you may forget the titles and the author's name, only to rediscover them in some anthology many years later, with a sense of recognition akin to discovering someone else recounting a dream that you yourself once had.

By "more than his share" we want to suggest that Sheckley wrote not just two or three unforgettable things but eight or nine or possibly twelve; more, even, than some of the above-named authors, though they are famous in a way he is not and will likely never be. Sheckley was unforgettable often enough to inspire memorable arguments about which stories, exactly, are his best. These arguments we found ourselves extending, rather than settling, until this inspired us to settle them in a capacious table of contents, one which also satisfies our growing sense that to read Sheckley was to want to read more Sheckley, and that the stories thrived in one another's company.

So our curtain's raised. Yet, though it is impossible not to want to argue that Sheckley's best rise above it, the context for his efforts is awfully particular. The American science-fiction pulp-digest format at mid-century, when Sheckley began publishing stories there, in magazines like *Astounding, Amazing, Infinity, If, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and above all, *Galaxy*, formed a vibrant and diverse alternate literary reality, one bounded from the realms of literary respectability. Within it, excellence was rewarded; Sheckley, only a decade after his first stories' appearance, was widely understood as a paragon and exemplar. (In that parallel critical realm, Sheckley was often described as "the best of the *Galaxy* writers," to an audience for whom that was real and telling

praise—surely an illustration of just how parallel a critical realm can be.) The elegant urbanity of Sheckley's stories meant he was soon also published in *Esquire, Playboy*, and elsewhere outside the strict limits of the "SF field," but there can be no question that the development of his career, and his art, took place inside, not outside, that sphere of activity. Nor that it was mostly—or completely—ignored elsewhere.

This matters not because of some general principle that such boundaries should be broken down (in retrospect, any such sentiments are useless) but because, in 1953, the SF field was something more than a social formation or a loose bundle of tropes; it was a kind of argument conducted in collective-imaginative space about what kinds of fictional responses to the twentieth century, with its velocity of wonders and horrors, were possible, or appropriate. Sheckley's brilliant stories entered into the thick of this argument and became essential to it. Some of their lasting vitality is traceable to this dynamic, even when that framework is obscured. To those only superficially familiar with the history of American SF, Sheckley may appear to write in lonely skepticism against what are often presented as its technocratic rationalism and optimism. That form of skepticism, however, was by the time of Sheckley's appearance already a valued part of the field. Sheckley's sardonic outcry, his characteristic tone—satire riding an undertow of despair—extended from the morbid and agonistic strains in earlier SF writers like Theodore Sturgeon, Henry Kuttner, and C.M. Kornbluth. The lineage is what made his work legible in the field, and what allowed it to embolden the SF writers who came after, like Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, and J.G. Ballard.

Sheckley's stories are anchored in another context, too: the explosion, in the 1950s, of American consumer culture, with its devilish mix of seductive freedoms and injunctions to conformity. As much as the Beats, and the "sick" comedians like Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, or other artists then fitfully finding voice in terms that anticipated the countercultural '60s, Sheckley railed against the cloistering assumptions of his time. And yet, as with John Cheever and Richard Yates, the iconography of '50s culture—commuter businessmen, suburban housewives, the quicksand enticements of middle-class splendor—were imprinted so deeply in Sheckley's work that he continued to write from inside them, and against them, long after the historical moment had passed.

Our selection of Sheckley's representative best centers in the 1950s, with just a scattering of stories from subsequent decades. Like the painter Giorgio de Chirico, Sheckley had a period of greatness defined specifically by the application of a formal pressure against the chaos of an instinctive surrealism. In Sheckley's case, the forms were the motifs of '50s science fiction: the tales of first contact with aliens; the meticulous exposés of alienation and spectatorship in a burgeoning media culture; the *Twilight Zone*–style allegories and inversions employed to destabilize the apparent normality of waking life. When in his later stories Sheckley was driven to shake off these generic materials, the results, while often verbally astonishing, suffer from the loss of the structural elegance that makes the earlier work perfect stories of their type.

In an introduction to a gathering of his "greatest hits" that was published in 1979 (one with plenty of overlap with our own selection), Sheckley wrote:

> From this position, these stories from a vanished age appear to me safe; acceptable; commodities sanctioned by their own continued existence, and given a mysterious and no doubt spurious air of rightness by the processes of time. Yet when I wrote them, each story involved me in a dangerous movement into an unfamiliar situation, and each story initiated a process in which a concept, itself sometimes barely visible, was to be freighted with words, and perhaps sunk by them.

He added:

> I have nothing to say about the stories themselves. To talk about them I would have to reread them, and I went through entirely enough hell writing them ever to want to look at them again. Anyhow, a glance at the contents page brings them all back to me, as well as the dingy rooms in crumbling brownstones in New York where I wrote most of them ...

That's the sound of Robert Sheckley, morose comedian, raining on his own parade. We wish he could be around to rain on this one.

—ALEX ABRAMOVICH *and* JONATHAN LETHEM

STORE OF THE WORLDS

THE MONSTERS

CORDOVIR and Hum stood on the rocky mountaintop, watching the new thing happen. Both felt rather good about it. It was undoubtedly the newest thing that had happened for some time.

"By the way the sunlight glints from it," Hum said, "I'd say it is made of metal."

"I'll accept that," Cordovir said. "But what holds it up in the air?"

They both stared intently down to the valley where the new thing was happening. A pointed object was hovering over the ground. From one end of it poured a substance resembling fire.

"It's balancing on the fire," Hum said. "That should be apparent even to your old eyes."

Cordovir lifted himself higher on his thick tail, to get a better look. The object settled to the ground and the fire stopped.

"Shall we go down and have a closer look?" Hum asked.

"All right. I think we have time—wait! What day is this?"

Hum calculated silently, then said, "The fifth day of Luggat."

"Damn" Cordovir said. "I have to go home and kill my wife."

"It's a few hours before sunset," Hum said. "I think you have time to do both."

Cordovir wasn't sure. "I'd hate to be late."

"Well then. You know how fast I am," Hum said. "If it gets late, I'll hurry back and kill her myself. How about that?"

"That's very decent of you." Cordovir thanked the younger man and together they slithered down the steep mountainside.

In front of the metal object both men halted and stood up on their tails.

"Rather bigger than I thought," Cordovir said, measuring the metal object with his eye. He estimated that it was slightly longer than their village, and almost half as wide. They crawled a circle around it, observing that the metal was tooled, presumably by human tentacles.

In the distance the smaller sun had set.

"I think we had better get back," Cordovir said, noting the cessation of light complacently.

"*I* still have plenty of time." Hum flexed his muscles.

"Yes, but a man likes to kill his own wife."

"As you wish." They started off to the village at a brisk pace.

In his house, Cordovir's wife was finishing supper. She had her back to the door, as etiquette required. Cordovir killed her with a single flying slash of his tail, dragged her body outside, and sat down to eat.

After meal and meditation he went to the Gathering. Hum, with the impatience of youth, was already there, telling of the metal object. He probably bolted his supper, Cordovir thought with mild distaste. After the youngster had finished, Cordovir gave his own observations. The only thing he added to Hum's account was an idea: that the metal object might contain intelligent beings.

"What makes you think so?" Mishill, another elder, asked.

"The fact that there was fire from the object as it came down," Cordovir said, "joined to the fact that the fire stopped after the object was on the ground. Some being, I contend, was responsible for

turning it off."

"Not necessarily," Mishill said. The village men talked about it late into the night. Then they broke up the meeting, buried the various murdered wives, and went to their homes.

Lying in the darkness, Cordovir discovered that he hadn't made up his mind as yet about the new thing. Presuming it contained intelligent beings, would they be moral? Would they have a sense of right and wrong? Cordovir doubted it, and went to sleep.

The next morning every male in the village went to the metal object. This was proper, since the functions of males were to examine new things and to limit the female population. They formed a circle around it, speculating on what might be inside.

"I believe they will be human beings," Hum's elder brother Esktel said. Cordovir shook his entire body in disagreement.

"Monsters, more likely," he said. "If you take in account—"

"Not necessarily," Esktel said. "Consider the logic of our physical development. A single focusing eye—"

"But in the great Outside," Cordovir said, "there may be many strange races, most of them nonhuman. In the infinitude—"

"Still," Esktel put in, "the logic of our—"

"As I was saying," Cordovir went on, "the chance is infinitesimal that they would resemble us. Their vehicle, for example. Would we build—"

"But on strictly logical grounds," Esktel said, "you can see—"

That was the third time Cordovir had been interrupted. With a single movement of his tail he smashed Esktel against the metal object. Esktel fell to the ground, dead.

"I have often considered my brother a boor," Hum said. "What were you saying?"

But Cordovir was interrupted again. A piece of metal set in the greater piece of metal squeaked, turned, and lifted, and a creature came out.

Cordovir saw at once that he had been right. The thing that crawled out of the hole was twin-tailed. It was covered to its top with something partially metal and partially hide. And its color! Cordovir shuddered.

The thing was the color of wet, flayed flesh.

All the villagers had backed away, waiting to see what the thing would do. At first it didn't do anything. It stood on the metal surface, and a bulbous object that topped its body moved from side to side. But there were no accompanying body movements to give the gesture meaning. Finally, the thing raised both tentacles and made noises.

"Do you think it's trying to communicate?" Mishill asked softly.

Three more creatures appeared in the metal hole, carrying metal sticks in their tentacles. The things made noises at each other.

"They are decidedly not human," Cordovir said firmly. "The next question is, are they moral beings?" One of the things crawled down the metal side and stood on the ground. The rest pointed their metal sticks at the ground. It seemed to be some sort of religious ceremony.

"Could anything so hideous be moral?" Cordovir asked, his hide twitching with distaste. Upon closer inspection, the creatures were more horrible than could be dreamed. The bulbous object on their bodies just might be a head, Cordovir decided, even though it was unlike any head he had ever seen. But in the middle of that head instead of a smooth, characterful surface was a raised ridge. Two round indentures were on either side of it, and two more knobs on either side of that. And in the lower half of the head—if such it was —a pale, reddish slash ran across. Cordovir supposed this might be

considered a mouth, with some stretching of the imagination.

Nor was this all, Cordovir observed. The things were so constructed as to show the presence of bone! When they moved their limbs, it wasn't a smooth, flowing gesture, the fluid motion of human beings. Rather, it was the jerky snap of a tree limb.

"God above," Gilrig, an intermediate-age male gasped.

"We should kill them and put them out of their misery!" Other men seemed to feel the same way, and the villagers flowed forward.

"Wait!" one of the youngsters shouted. "Let's communicate with them, if such is possible. They might still be moral beings. The Outside is wide, remember, and anything is possible."

Cordovir argued for immediate extermination, but the villagers stopped and discussed it among themselves. Hum, with characteristic bravado, flowed up to the thing on the ground.

"Hello," Hum said.

The thing said something.

"I can't understand it," Hum said, and started to crawl back. The creature waved its jointed tentacles—if they were tentacles—and motioned at one of the suns. He made a sound.

"Yes, it is warm, isn't it?" Hum said cheerfully.

The creature pointed at the ground, and made another sound.

"We haven't had especially good crops this year," Hum said conversationally.

The creature pointed at itself and made a sound.

"I agree," Hum said. "You're as ugly as sin."

Presently the villagers grew hungry and crawled back to the village. Hum stayed and listened to the things making noises at him, and Cordovir waited nervously for Hum.

"You know," Hum said, after he rejoined Cordovir, "I think they want to learn our language. Or want me to learn theirs."

"Don't do it," Cordovir said, glimpsing the misty edge of a great evil.

"I believe I will," Hum murmured. Together they climbed the cliffs back to the village.

That afternoon Cordovir went to the surplus female pen and formally asked a young woman if she would reign in his house for twenty-five days. Naturally, the woman accepted gratefully.

On the way home, Cordovir met Hum, going to the pen.

"Just killed my wife," Hum said, superfluously, since why else would he be going to the surplus female stock?

"Are you going back to the creatures tomorrow?" Cordovir asked.

"I might," Hum answered, "if nothing new presents itself."

"The thing to find out is if they are moral beings or monsters."

"Right," Hum said, and slithered on.

There was a Gathering that evening, after supper. All the villagers agreed that the things were nonhuman. Cordovir argued strenuously that their very appearance belied any possibility of humanity. Nothing so hideous could have moral standards, a sense of right and wrong, and above all, a notion of truth.

The young men didn't agree, probably because there had been a dearth of new things recently. They pointed out that the metal object was obviously a product of intelligence. Intelligence axiomatically means standards of differentiation. Differentiation implies right and wrong.

It was a delicious argument. Olgolel contradicted Arast and was killed by him. Mavrt, in an unusual fit of anger for so placid an individual, killed the three Holian brothers and was himself

killed by Hum, who was feeling pettish. Even the surplus females could be heard arguing about it, in their pen in a corner of the village.

Weary and happy, the villagers went to sleep.

The next few weeks saw no end of the argument. Life went on much as usual, though. The women went out in the morning, gathered food, prepared it, and laid eggs. The eggs were taken to the surplus females to be hatched. As usual, about eight females were hatched to every male. On the twenty-fifth day of each marriage, or a little earlier, each man killed his woman and took another.

The males went down to the ship to listen to Hum learning the language; then, when that grew boring, they returned to their customary wandering through hills and forests, looking for new things.

The alien monsters stayed close to their ship, coming out only when Hum was there.

Twenty-four days after the arrival of the nonhumans, Hum announced that he could communicate with them, after a fashion.

"They say they come from far away," Hum told the village that evening. "They say that they are bisexual, like us, and that they are humans, like us. They say there are reasons for their different appearance, but I couldn't understand that part of it."

"If we accept them as humans," Mishill said, "then everything they say is true."

The rest of the villagers shook in agreement.

"They say that they don't want to disturb our life, but would be very interested in observing it. They want to come to the village and look around."

"I see no reason why not," one of the younger men said.

"No!" Cordovir shouted. "You are letting in evil. These monsters are insidious. I believe that they are capable of—telling an untruth!" The other elders agreed, but when pressed, Cordovir had no proof to back up this vicious accusation.

"After all," Sil pointed out, "just because they look like monsters, you can't take it for granted that they think like monsters as well."

"I can," Cordovir said, but he was outvoted.

Hum went on. "They have offered me—or us, I'm not sure which, various metal objects which they say will do various things. I ignored this breach of etiquette, since I considered they didn't know any better."

Cordovir nodded. The youngster was growing up. He was showing, at long last, that he had some manners. "They want to come to the village tomorrow."

"No!" Cordovir shouted, but the vote was against him.

"Oh, by the way," Hum said, as the meeting was breaking up. "They have several females among them. The ones with the very red mouths are females. It will be interesting to see how the males kill them. Tomorrow is the twenty-fifth day since they came."

The next day the things came to the village, crawling slowly and laboriously over the cliffs. The villagers were able to observe the extreme brittleness of their limbs, the terrible awkwardness of their motions.

"No beauty whatsoever," Cordovir muttered. "And they all look alike."

In the village the things acted without any decency. They crawled into huts and out of huts. They jabbered at the surplus female pen. They picked up eggs and examined them. They peered at the villagers through black things and shiny things.

In midafternoon, Rantan, an elder, decided it was about time he killed his woman. So he pushed the thing who was examining his hut aside and smashed his female to death.

Instantly, two of the things started jabbering at each other, hurrying out of the hut.

One had the red mouth of a female.

"He must have remembered it was time to kill his own woman," Hum observed. The villagers waited, but nothing happened.

"Perhaps," Rantan said, "perhaps he would like someone to kill her for him. It might be the custom of their land."

Without further ado Rantan slashed down the female with his tail.

The male creature made a terrible noise and pointed a metal stick at Rantan. Rantan collapsed, dead.

"That's odd," Mishill said. "I wonder if that denotes disapproval?"

The things from the metal object—eight of them—were in a tight little circle. One was holding the dead female, and the rest were pointing the metal sticks on all sides. Hum went up and asked them what was wrong.

"I don't understand," Hum said, after he spoke with them. "They used words I haven't learned. But I gather that their emotion is one of reproach."

The monsters were backing away. Another villager, deciding it was about time, killed his wife who was standing in a doorway. The group of monsters stopped and jabbered at each other. Then they motioned to Hum.

Hum's body motion was incredulous after he had talked with them.

"If I understood right," Hum said, "They are ordering us not to kill any more of our women!"

"What!" Cordovir and a dozen others shouted.

"I'll ask them again." Hum went back into conference with the monsters who were waving metal sticks in their tentacles.

"That's right," Hum said. Without further preamble he flipped his tail, throwing one of the monsters across the village square. Immediately the others began to point their sticks while retreating rapidly.

After they were gone, the villagers found that seventeen males were dead. Hum, for some reason, had been missed.

"Now will you believe me!" Cordovir shouted. "The creatures told *a deliberate untruth*! They said they wouldn't molest us and then they proceed to kill seventeen of us! Not only an amoral act—but *a concerted death effort*!"

It was almost past human understanding.

"A deliberate untruth!" Cordovir shouted the blasphemy, sick with loathing. Men rarely discussed the possibility of anyone telling an untruth.

The villagers were beside themselves with anger and revulsion, once they realized the full concept of an *untruthful* creature. And, added to that was the monsters' concerted death effort!

It was like the most horrible nightmare come true. Suddenly it became apparent that these creatures didn't kill females. Undoubtedly they allowed them to spawn unhampered. The thought of that was enough to make a strong man retch.

The surplus females broke out of their pens and, joined by the wives, demanded to know what was happening. When they were told, they were twice as indignant as the men, such being the nature of women.

"Kill them!" the surplus females roared. "Don't let them change our ways. Don't let them introduce immorality!"

"It's true," Hum said sadly. "I should have guessed it."

"'They must be killed at once!" a female shouted. Being surplus, she had no name at present, but she made up for that in blazing personality.

"We women desire only to live moral, decent lives, hatching eggs in the pen until our time of marriage comes. And then twenty-five ecstatic days! How could we desire more? These monsters will destroy our way of life. They will make us as terrible as they!"

"Now do you understand?" Cordovir screamed at the men. "I warned you, I presented it to you, and you ignored me! Young men must listen to old men in time of crisis!" In his rage he killed two youngsters with a blow of his tail. The villagers applauded.

"Drive them out," Cordovir shouted. "Before they corrupt us!"

All the females rushed off to kill the monsters.

"They have death-sticks," Hum observed. "Do the females know?"

"I don't believe so," Cordovir said. He was completely calm now. "You'd better go and tell them."

"I'm tired," Hum said sulkily. "I've been translating. Why don't you go?"

"Oh, let's both go," Cordovir said, bored with the youngster's adolescent moodiness. Accompanied by half the villagers they hurried off after the females.

They overtook them on the edge of the cliff that overlooked the object. Hum explained the death-sticks while Cordovir considered the problem.

"Roll stones on them," he told the females. "Perhaps you can break the metal of the object."

The females started rolling stones down the cliffs with great energy. Some bounced off the metal of the object. Immediately, lines of red fire came from the object and females were killed. The ground shook.

"Let's move back," Cordovir said. "The females have it well in hand, and this shaky ground makes me giddy."

Together with the rest of the males they moved to a safe distance and watched the action.

Women were dying right and left, but they were reinforced by women of other villages who had heard of the menace. They were fighting for their homes now, their rights, and they were fiercer than a man could ever be. The object was throwing fire all over the cliff, but the fire helped dislodge more stones which rained down on the thing. Finally, big fires came out of one end of the metal object.

A landslide started, and the object got into the air just in time. It barely missed a mountain; then it climbed steadily, until it was a little black speck against the larger sun. And then it was gone.

That evening, it was discovered that fifty-three females had been killed. This was fortunate since it helped keep down the surplus female population. The problem would become even more acute now, since seventeen males were gone in a single lump.

Cordovir was feeling exceedingly proud of himself. His wife had been gloriously killed in the fighting, but he took another at once.

"We had better kill our wives sooner than every twenty-five days for a while," he said at the evening Gathering. Just until things get back to normal."

The surviving females, back in the pen, heard him and applauded wildly.

"I wonder where the things have gone," Hum said, offering the question to the Gathering.

"Probably away to enslave some defenseless race," Cordovir said.

"Not necessarily," Mishill put in, and the evening argument was on.

SEVENTH VICTIM

STANTON Frelaine sat at his desk, trying to look as busy as an executive should at nine-thirty in the morning. It was impossible. He couldn't concentrate on the advertisement he had written the previous night, couldn't think about business. All he could do was wait until the mail came.

He had been expecting his notification for two weeks now. The government was behind schedule, as usual.

The glass door of his office was marked *Morger and Frelaine, Clothiers*. It opened, and E.J. Morger walked in, limping slightly from his old gunshot wound. His shoulders were bent; but at the age of seventy-three, he wasn't worrying much about his posture.

"Well, Stan?" Morger asked. "What about that ad?"

Frelaine had joined Morger sixteen years ago, when he was twenty-seven. Together they had built Protec-Clothes into a million-dollar concern.

"I suppose you can run it," Frelaine said, handing the slip of paper to Morger. If only the mail would come earlier, he thought.

"'Do you own a Protec-Suit?'" Morger read aloud, holding the paper close to his eyes. "'The finest tailoring in the world has gone into Morger and Frelaine's Protec-Suit, to make it the leader in men's fashions.'"

Morger cleared his throat and glanced at Frelaine. He smiled and read on.

"'Protec-Suit is the safest as well as the smartest. Every Protec-Suit comes with special built-in gun pocket, guaranteed not to bulge. No one will know you are carrying a gun—except you. The gun pocket is exceptionally easy to get at, permitting fast, unhindered draw. Choice of hip or breast pocket.' Very nice," Morger commented.

Frelaine nodded morosely.

"'The Protec-Suit Special has the fling-out gun pocket, the greatest modern advance in personal protection. A touch of the concealed button throws the gun into your hand, cocked, safeties off. Why not drop into the Protec-Store nearest you? *Why not be safe?*'

"That's fine," Morger said. "That's a very nice, dignified ad." He thought for a moment, fingering his white mustache. "Shouldn't you mention that Protec-Suits come in a variety of styles, single and double-breasted, one and two button rolls, deep and shallow flares?"

"Right. I forgot."

Frelaine took back the sheet and jotted a note on the edge of it. Then he stood up, smoothing his jacket over his prominent stomach. Frelaine was forty-three, a little overweight, a little bald on top. He was an amiable looking man with cold eyes.

"Relax," Morger said. "It'll come in today's mail."

Frelaine forced himself to smile. He felt like pacing the floor, but instead sat on the edge of the desk.

"You'd think it was my first kill," he said, with a deprecating smile.

"I know how it is," Morger said. "Before I hung up my gun, I couldn't sleep for a month, waiting for a notification. I know."

The two men waited. Just as the silence was becoming unbearable, the door opened. A clerk walked in and deposited the mail on Frelaine's desk.

Frelaine swung around and gathered up the letters. He thumbed through them rapidly and found

what he had been waiting for—the long white envelope from ECB, with the official government seal on it.

"That's it!" Frelaine said, and broke into a grin. "That's the baby!"

"Fine." Morger eyed the envelope with interest, but didn't ask Frelaine to open it. It would be a breach of etiquette, as well as a violation in the eyes of the law. No one was supposed to know a Victim's name except his Hunter. "Have a good hunt."

"I expect to," Frelaine replied confidently. His desk was in order—had been for a week. He picked up his briefcase.

"A good kill will do you a world of good," Morger said, put- ting his hand lightly on Frelaine's padded shoulder. "You've been keyed up."

"I know," Frelaine grinned again and shook Morger's hand.

"Wish I was a kid again," Morger said, glancing down at his crippled leg with wryly humorous eyes. "Makes me want to pick up a gun again."

The old man had been quite a Hunter in his day. Ten successful hunts had qualified him for the exclusive Tens Club. And, of course, for each hunt Morger had had to act as Victim, so he had twenty kills to his credit.

"I sure hope my Victim isn't anyone like you," Frelaine said, half in jest.

"Don't worry about it. What number will this be?"

"The seventh."

"Lucky seven. Go to it," Morger said. "We'll get you into the Tens yet."

Frelaine waved his hand and started out the door.

"Just don't get careless," warned Morger. "All it takes is a single slip and I'll need a new partner. If you don't mind, I like the one I've got now."

"I'll be careful," Frelaine promised.

Instead of taking a bus, Frelaine walked to his apartment. He wanted time to cool off. There was no sense in acting like a kid on his first kill.

As he walked, Frelaine kept his eyes strictly to the front. Staring at anyone was practically asking for a bullet, if the man happened to be serving as Victim. Some Victims shot if you just glanced at them. Nervous fellows. Frelaine prudently looked above the heads of the people he passed.

Ahead of him was a huge billboard, offering J.F. O'Donovan's services to the public.

"Victims!" the sign proclaimed in huge red letters. "Why take chances? Use an O'Donovan accredited Spotter. Let us locate your assigned killer. Pay *after* you get him!"

The sign reminded Frelaine. He would call Ed Morrow as soon as he reached his apartment.

He crossed the street, quickening his stride. He could hardly wait to get home now, to open the envelope and discover who his Victim was. Would he be clever or stupid? Rich, like Frelaine's fourth Victim, or poor, like the first and second? Would he have an organized spotter service, or try to go it on his own?

The excitement of the chase was wonderful, coursing through his veins, quickening his heartbeat. From a block or so away, he heard gunfire. Two quick shots, and then a final one.

Somebody got his man, Frelaine thought. Good for him.

It was a superb feeling, he told himself. He was *alive* again.

At his one-room apartment, the first thing Frelaine did was call Ed Morrow, his spotter. The man worked as a garage attendant between calls.

"Hello, Ed? Frelaine."

"Oh, hi, Mr. Frelaine." He could see the man's thin, grease-stained face, grinning flat-lipped at the

telephone.

"I'm going out on one, Ed."

"Good luck, Mr. Frelaine," Ed Morrow said. "I suppose you'll want me to stand by?"

"That's right. I don't expect to be gone more than a week or two. I'll probably get my notification of Victim Status within three months of the kill."

"I'll be standing by. Good hunting, Mr. Frelaine."

"Thanks. So long." He hung up. It was a wise safety measure to reserve a first-class spotter. After his kill, it would be Frelaine's turn as Victim. Then, once again, Ed Morrow would be his life insurance.

And what a marvelous spotter Morrow was! Uneducated—stupid, really. But what an eye for people! Morrow was a natural. His pale eyes could tell an out-of-towner at a glance. He was diabolically clever at rigging an ambush. An indispensable man.

Frelaine took out the envelope, chuckling to himself, remembering some of the tricks Morrow had turned for the Hunters. Still smiling, he glanced at the data inside the envelope.

Janet-Marie Patzig.

His Victim was a female!

Frelaine stood up and paced for a few moments. Then he read the letter again. Janet-Marie Patzig. No mistake. A girl. Three photographs were enclosed, her address, and the usual descriptive data.

Frelaine frowned. He had never killed a female.

He hesitated for a moment, then picked up the telephone and dialed ECB.

"Emotional Catharsis Bureau, Information Section," a man's voice answered.

"Say, look," Frelaine said. "I just got my notification and I pulled a girl. Is that in order?" He gave the clerk the girl's name.

"It's all in order, sir," the clerk replied after a minute of checking micro-files. "The girl registered with the board under her own free will. The law says she has the same rights and privileges as a man."

"Could you tell me how many kills she has?"

"I'm sorry, sir. The only information you're allowed is the Victim's legal status and the descriptive data you have received."

"I see." Frelaine paused. "Could I draw another?"

"You can refuse the hunt, of course. That is your legal right. But you will not be allowed another Victim until you have served. Do you wish to refuse?"

"Oh, no," Frelaine said hastily. "I was just wondering. Thank you."

He hung up and sat down in his largest armchair, loosening his belt. This required some thought.

Damn women, he grumbled to himself, always trying to horn in on a man's game. Why can't they stay home?

But they were free citizens, he reminded himself. Still, it just didn't seem *feminine*.

He knew that, historically speaking, the Emotional Catharsis Board had been established for men and men only. The board had been formed at the end of the fourth world war—or sixth, as some historians counted it.

At that time there had been a driving need for permanent, lasting peace. The reason was practical, as were the men who engineered it.

Simply—annihilation was just around the corner.

In the world wars, weapons increased in magnitude, efficiency, and exterminating power. Soldiers became accustomed to them, less and less reluctant to use them.

But the saturation point had been reached. Another war would truly be the war to end all wars. There would be no one left to start another.

So this peace *had* to last for all time, but the men who engineered it were practical. They recognized the tensions and dislocations still present, the cauldrons in which wars are brewed. They asked themselves why peace had never lasted in the past.

"Because men like to fight," was their answer.

"Oh, no!" screamed the idealists.

But the men who engineered the peace were forced to postulate, regretfully, the presence of a need for violence in a large percentage of mankind.

Men aren't angels. They aren't fiends, either. They are just very human beings, with a high degree of combativeness.

With the scientific knowledge and the power they had at that moment, the practical men could have gone a long way toward breeding this trait out of the race. Many thought this was the answer.

The practical men didn't. They recognized the validity of competition, love of battle, courage in the face of overwhelming odds. These, they felt, were admirable traits for a race, and insurance toward its perpetuity. Without them, the race would be bound to retrogress.

The tendency toward violence, they found, was inextricably linked with ingenuity, flexibility, drive.

The problem, then: To arrange a peace that would last after they were gone. To stop the race from destroying itself, without removing the responsible traits.

The way to do this, they decided, was to rechannel Man's violence.

Provide him with an outlet, an expression.

The first big step was the legalization of gladiatorial events, complete with blood and thunder. But more was needed. Sublimations worked only up to a point. Then people demanded the real thing.

There is no substitute for murder.

So murder was legalized, on a strictly individual basis, and only for those who wanted it. The governments were directed to create Emotional Catharsis Boards.

After a period of experimentation, uniform rules were adopted.

Anyone who wanted to murder could sign up at the ECB. Giving certain data and assurances, he would be granted a Victim.

Anyone who signed up to murder, under the government rules, had to take his turn a few months later as Victim—if he survived.

That, in essence, was the setup. The individual could commit as many murders as he wanted. But between each, he had to be a Victim. If he successfully killed his Hunter, he could stop, or sign up for another murder.

At the end of ten years, an estimated third of the world's civilized population had applied for at least one murder. The number slid to a fourth, and stayed there.

Philosophers shook their heads, but the practical men were satisfied. War was where it belonged—in the hands of the individual.

Of course, there were ramifications to the game, and elaborations. Once its existence had been accepted it became big business. There were services for Victim and Hunter alike.

The Emotional Catharsis Board picked the Victims' names at random. A Hunter was allowed two weeks in which to make his kill. This had to be done by his own ingenuity, unaided. He was given the name of his Victim, address, and description, and allowed to use a standard-caliber pistol. He could wear no armor of any sort.

The Victim was notified a week before the Hunter. He was told only that he was a Victim. He did not know the name of his Hunter. He was allowed his choice of armor. He could hire spotters. A spotter couldn't kill; only Victim and Hunter could do that. But he could detect a stranger in town, or ferret out a nervous gunman.

The Victim could arrange any kind of ambush in his power to kill the Hunter.

There were stiff penalties for killing or wounding the wrong man, for no other murder was allowed. Grudge killings and gain killings were punishable by death.

The beauty of the system was that the people who wanted to kill could do so. Those who didn't—the bulk of the population—didn't have to.

At least, there weren't any more big wars. Not even the imminence of one.

Just hundreds of thousands of small ones.

Frelaine didn't especially like the idea of killing a woman; but she *had* signed up. It wasn't his fault. And he wasn't going to lose out on his seventh hunt.

He spent the rest of the morning memorizing the data on his Victim, then filed the letter.

Janet Patzig lived in New York. That was good. He enjoyed hunting in a big city, and he had always wanted to see New York. Her age wasn't given, but to judge from her photographs, she was in her early twenties.

Frelaine phoned for his jet reservations to New York, then took a shower. He dressed with care in a new Protec-Suit Special made for the occasion. From his collection he selected a gun, cleaned and oiled it, and fitted it into the fling-out pocket of the suit. Then he packed his suitcase.

A pulse of excitement was pounding in his veins. Strange, he thought, how each killing was a new thrill. It was something you just didn't tire of, the way you did of French pastry or women or drinking or anything else. It was always new and different.

Finally, he looked over his books to see which he would take.

His library contained all the good books on the subject. He wouldn't need any of his Victim books, like L. Fred Tracy's *Tactics for the Victim*, with its insistence on a rigidly controlled environment, or Dr. Frisch's *Don't Think Like a Victim!*

He would be very interested in those in a few months, when he was a Victim again. Now he wanted hunting books.

Tactics for Hunting Humans was the standard and definitive work, but he had it almost memorized. *Development of the Ambush* was not adapted to his present needs.

He chose *Hunting in Cities*, by Mitwell and Clark; *Spotting the Spotter*, by Algreen; and *The Victim's Ingroup*, by the same author.

Everything was in order. He left a note for the milkman, locked his apartment, and took a cab to the airport.

In New York, he checked into a hotel in the midtown area, not too far from his Victim's address. The clerks were smiling and attentive, which bothered Frelaine. He didn't like to be recognized so easily as an out-of-town killer.

The first thing he saw in his room was a pamphlet on his bed-table. *How to Get the Most out of your Emotional Catharsis*, it was called, with the compliments of the management. Frelaine smiled and thumbed through it.

Since it was his first visit to New York, he spent the afternoon just walking the streets in his Victim's neighborhood. After that, he wandered through a few stores.

Martinson and Black was a fascinating place. He went through their Hunter-Hunted room. There were lightweight bulletproof vests for Victims, and Richard Arlington hats, with bulletproof crowns.

On one side was a large display of a new .38 caliber sidearm.

"Use the Malvern Strait-shot!" the ad proclaimed. "ECB-approved. Carries a load of twelve shots. Tested deviation less than .001 inches per 1000 feet. Don't miss your Victim! Don't risk your life without the best! Be safe with Malvern!"

Frelaine smiled. The ad was good, and the small black weapon looked ultimately efficient. But he was satisfied with the one he had.

There was a special sale on trick canes, with concealed four-shot magazine, promising safety and concealment. As a young man, Frelaine had gone in heavily for novelties. But now he knew that the old-fashioned ways were usually best.

Outside the store, four men from the Department of Sanitation were carting away a freshly killed corpse. Frelaine regretted missing the take.

He ate dinner in a good restaurant and went to bed early.

Tomorrow he had a lot to do.

The next day, with the face of his Victim before him, Frelaine walked through her neighborhood. He didn't look closely at anyone. Instead, he moved rapidly, as though he were really going somewhere, the way an old Hunter should walk.

He passed several bars and dropped into one for a drink. Then he went on, down a side street off Lexington Avenue.

There was a pleasant sidewalk café there. Frelaine walked past it.

And there she was! He could never mistake the face. It was Janet Patzig, seated at a table, staring into a drink. She didn't look up as he passed.

Frelaine walked to the end of the block. He turned the corner and stopped, hands trembling.

Was the girl crazy, exposing herself in the open? Did she think she had a charmed life?

He hailed a taxi and had the man drive around the block. Sure enough, she was just sitting there. Frelaine took a careful look.

She seemed younger than her pictures, but he couldn't be sure. He would guess her to be not much over twenty. Her dark hair was parted in the middle and combed above her ears, giving her a nunlike appearance. Her expression, as far as Frelaine could tell, was one of resigned sadness.

Wasn't she even going to make an attempt to defend herself?

Frelaine paid the driver and hurried to a drugstore. Finding a vacant telephone booth, he called ECB.

"Are you sure that a Victim named Janet-Marie Patzig has been notified?"

"Hold on, sir." Frelaine tapped on the door while the clerk looked up the information. "Yes, sir. We have her personal confirmation. Is there anything wrong, sir?"

"No," Frelaine said. "Just wanted to check."

After all, it was no one's business if the girl didn't want to defend herself.

He was still entitled to kill her.

It was his turn.

He postponed it for that day, however, and went to a movie. After dinner, he returned to his room and read the ECB pamphlet. Then he lay on his bed and glared at the ceiling.

All he had to do was pump a bullet into her. Just ride by in a cab and kill her.

She was being a very bad sport about it, he decided resentfully, and went to sleep.

The next afternoon, Frelaine walked by the café again. The girl was back, sitting at the same table. Frelaine caught a cab.

"Drive around the block very slowly," he told the driver.

"Sure," the driver said, grinning with sardonic wisdom.

From the cab, Frelaine watched for spotters. As far as he could tell, the girl had none. Both her hands were in sight upon the table.

An easy, stationary target.

Frelaine touched the button of his double-breasted jacket. A fold flew open and the gun was in his hand. He broke it open and checked the cartridges, then closed it with a snap.

"Slowly, now," he told the driver.

The taxi crawled by the café. Frelaine took careful aim, centering the girl in his sights. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Damn it!" he said.

A waiter had passed by the girl. He didn't want to chance winging someone else.

"Around the block again," he told the driver.

The man gave him another grin and hunched down in his seat. Frelaine wondered if the driver would feel so happy if he knew that Frelaine was gunning for a woman.

This time there was no waiter around. The girl was lighting a cigarette, her mournful face intent on her lighter. Frelaine centered her in his sights, squarely above the eyes, and held his breath.

Then he shook his head and put the gun back in his pocket.

The idiotic girl was robbing him of the full benefit of his catharsis.

He paid the driver and started to walk.

It's too easy, he told himself. He was used to a real chase. Most of the other six kills had been quite difficult. The Victims had tried every dodge. One had hired at least a dozen spotters. But Frelaine had reached them all by altering his tactics to meet the situation.

Once he had dressed as a milkman, another time as a bill collector. The sixth Victim he had had to chase through the Sierra Nevadas. The man had clipped him, too. But Frelaine had done better.

How could he be proud of this one? What would the Tens Club say?

That brought Frelaine up with a start. He wanted to get into the club. Even if he passed up this girl he would have to defend himself against a Hunter. If he survived, he would still be four hunts away from membership. At that rate, he might never get in.

He began to pass the café again, then, on impulse, stopped abruptly.

"Hello," he said.

Janet Patzig looked at him out of sad blue eyes, but said nothing.

"Say, look," he said, sitting down. "If I'm being fresh, just tell me and I'll go. I'm an out-of-towner. Here on a convention. And I'd just like someone feminine to talk to. If you'd rather I didn't —"

"I don't care," Janet Patzig said tonelessly.

"A brandy," Frelaine told the waiter. Janet Patzig's glass was still half full.

Frelaine looked at the girl and he could feel his heart throbbing against his ribs. This was more like it—having a drink with your Victim!

"My name's Stanton Frelaine," he said, knowing it didn't matter.

"Janet."

"Janet what?"

"Janet Patzig."

"Nice to know you." Frelaine said, in a perfectly natural voice. "Are you doing anything tonight, Janet?"

"I'm probably being killed tonight," she said quietly.

Frelaine looked at her carefully. Did she realize who he was? For all he knew, she had a gun leveled at him under the table.

He kept his hand close to the fling-out button.

"Are you a Victim?" he asked.

"You guessed it," she said sardonically. "If I were you, I'd stay out of the way. No sense getting hit by mistake."

Frelaine couldn't understand the girl's calm. Was she a suicide? Perhaps she just didn't care. Perhaps she wanted to die.

"Haven't you got any spotters?" he asked, with the right expression of amazement.

"No." She looked at him, full in the face, and Frelaine saw something he hadn't noticed before.

She was very lovely.

"I am a bad, bad girl," she said lightly. "I got the idea I'd like to commit a murder, so I signed for ECB. Then—I couldn't do it."

Frelaine shook his head, sympathizing with her.

"But I'm still in, of course. Even if I didn't shoot, I still have to be a Victim."

"But why don't you hire some spotters?" he asked.

"I couldn't kill anyone," she said. "I just couldn't. I don't even have a gun."

"You've got a lot of courage," Frelaine said, "coming out in the open this way." Secretly, he was amazed at her stupidity.

"What can I do?" she asked listlessly. "You can't hide from a Hunter. Not a real one. And I don't have enough money to make a good disappearance."

"Since it's in your own defense, I should think—" Frelaine began, but she interrupted.

"No. I've made up my mind on that. This whole thing is wrong, the whole system. When I had my Victim in the sights—when I saw how easily I could—I could—"

She pulled herself together quickly.

"Oh, let's forget it," she said and smiled.

Frelaine found her smile dazzling.

After that, they talked of other things. Frelaine told her of his business, and she told him about New York. She was twenty-two, an unsuccessful actress.

They had supper together. When she accepted Frelaine's invitation to go to the Gladiatorials, he felt absurdly elated.

He called a cab—he seemed to be spending his entire time in New York in cabs—and opened the door for her. She started in. Frelaine hesitated. He could have pumped a shot into her at that moment. It would have been very easy.

But he held back. Just for the moment, he told himself.

The Gladiatorials were about the same as those held anywhere else, except that the talent was a little better. There were the usual historical events, swordsmen and netmen, duels with saber and foil.

Most of these, naturally, were fought to the death.

Then bull fighting, lion fighting, and rhino fighting, followed by the more modern events. Fights from behind barricades with bow and arrow. Dueling on a high wire.

The evening passed pleasantly.

Frelaine escorted the girl home, the palms of his hands sticky with sweat. He had never found a woman he liked better. And yet she was his legitimate kill.

He didn't know what he was going to do.

She invited him in and they sat together on the couch. The girl lighted a cigarette for herself with a

large lighter, then settled back.

"Are you leaving soon?" she asked him.

"I suppose so," Frelaine said. "The convention is only lasting another day."

She was silent for a moment. "I'll be sorry to see you go."

They were quiet for a while. Then Janet went to fix him a drink. Frelaine eyed her retreating back. Now was the time. He placed his hand near the button.

But the moment had passed for him, irrevocably. He wasn't going to kill her. You don't kill the girl you love.

The realization that he loved her was shocking. He'd come to kill, not to find a wife.

She came back with the drink and sat down opposite him, staring at emptiness.

"Janet," he said. "I love you."

She sat, just looking at him. There were tears in her eyes.

"You can't," she protested. "I'm a Victim. I won't live long enough to—"

"You won't be killed. I'm your Hunter."

She stared at him a moment, then laughed uncertainly.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "I'm going to marry you."

Suddenly she was in his arms.

"Oh, Lord!" she gasped. "The waiting—I've been so frightened—"

"It's all over," he told her. "Think what a story it'll make for our kids. How I came to murder you and left marrying you."

She kissed him, then sat back and lighted another cigarette.

"Let's start packing," Frelaine said. "I want—"

"Wait," Janet interrupted. "You haven't asked if *I* love *you*."

"What?"

She was still smiling, and the cigarette lighter was pointed at him. In the bottom of it was a black hole. A hole just large enough for a .38 caliber bullet.

"Don't kid around," he objected, getting to his feet.

"I'm not being funny, darling," she said.

In a fraction of a second, Frelaine had time to wonder how he could ever have thought she was not much over twenty. Looking at her now—*really* looking at her—he knew she couldn't be much less than thirty. Every minute of her strained, tense existence showed on her face.

"I don't love you, Stanton," she said very softly, the cigarette lighter poised.

Frelaine struggled for breath. One part of him was able to realize detachedly what a marvelous actress she really was. She must have known all along.

Frelaine pushed the button, and the gun was in his hand, cocked and ready.

The blow that struck him in the chest knocked him over a coffee table. The gun fell out of his hand. Gasping, half-conscious, he watched her take careful aim for the *coup de grace*.

"Now I can join the Tens," he heard her say elatedly as she squeezed the trigger.

SHAPE

PID THE pilot slowed the ship almost to a standstill. He peered anxiously at the green planet below.

Even without instruments, there was no mistaking it. Third from its sun, it was the only planet in this system capable of sustaining life. Peacefully it swam through its gauze of clouds.

It looked very innocent. And yet, something on this expedition had claimed the lives of every expedition the Glom had sent.

Pid hesitated a moment, before starting irrevocably down. He and his two crewmen were as ready now as they would ever be. Their compact Displacers were stored in body pouches, inactive but ready.

Pid wanted to say something to his crew, but wasn't sure how to put it.

The crew waited. Ilg the Radioman had sent the final message to the Glom planet. Ger the Detector read sixteen dials at once, and reported, "No sign of alien activity." His body surfaces flowed carelessly.

Pid noticed the flow, and knew what he had to say. Ever since they had left Glom, Shape-discipline had been disgustingly lax. The Invasion Chief had warned him; but still, he had to do something about it. It was his duty, since lower castes such as Radiomen and Detectors were notoriously prone to Shapelessness.

"A lot of hopes are resting on this expedition," he began slowly. "We're a long way from home now."

Ger the Detector nodded. Ilg the Radioman flowed out of his prescribed shape and molded himself comfortably to a wall.

"However," Pid said sternly, "Distance is no excuse for promiscuous Shapelessness."

Ilg flowed hastily back into proper Radioman's Shape.

"Exotic shapes will undoubtedly be called for," Pid went on. "And for that we have a special dispensation. But remember—any shape not assumed strictly in the line of duty is a device of The Shapeless One!"

Ger's body surfaces abruptly stopped flowing.

"That's all," Pid said, and flowed into his controls. The ship started down, so smoothly coordinated that Pid felt a glow of pride.

They were good workers, he decided. He just couldn't expect them to be as Shape-conscious as a high-caste Pilot. Even the Invasion Chief had told him that.

"Pid," the Invasion Chief had said at their last interview, "We need this planet desperately."

"Yes, sir," Pid had said, standing at full attention, never quivering from Optimum Pilot's Shape.

"One of you," the Chief said heavily, "must get through and set up a Displacer near an atomic power source. The army will be standing by at this end, ready to step through."

"We'll do it, sir," Pid said.

"This expedition has to succeed," the Chief said, and his features blurred momentarily from sheer fatigue. "In strictest confidence, there's considerable unrest on Glom. The miner caste is on strike, for instance. They want a new Digging Shape. Say the old one is inefficient."

Pid looked properly indignant. The Mining Shape had been set down by the ancients fifty thousand years ago, together with the rest of the basic shapes. And now these upstarts wanted to change it!

"That's not all," the Chief told him. "We've uncovered a new Cult of Shapelessness. Picked up almost eight thousand Glom, and I don't know how many more we missed."

Pid knew that Shapelessness was a lure of The Shapeless One, the greatest evil that the Glom mind conceived of. But how, he wondered, did Glom fall for His lures?

The Chief guessed his question. "Pid," he said, "I suppose it's difficult for you to understand. Do you enjoy Piloting?"

"Yes sir," Pid said simply. *Enjoy* Piloting! It was his entire life! Without a ship, he was nothing.

"Not all Glom feel that way," the Chief said. "I don't understand it either. All my ancestors have been Invasion Chiefs, back to the beginning of time. So of course *I* want to be an Invasion Chief. It's only natural, as well as lawful. But the lower castes don't feel that way." He shook his body sadly.

"I've told you this for a reason," the Chief went on. "We Glom need more room. This unrest is caused purely by crowding. All our psychologists say so. Another planet to expand into will cure everything. So we're counting on you, Pid."

"Yes, sir," Pid said, with a glow of pride.

The Chief rose to end the interview. Then he changed his mind and sat down again.

"You'll have to watch your crew," he said. "They're loyal, no doubt, but low-caste. And you know the lower castes."

Pid did indeed.

"Ger, your Detector, is suspected of harboring Alterationist tendencies. He was once fined for assuming a quasi-Hunter shape. Ilg has never had any definite charge brought against him. But I hear that he remains immobile for suspiciously long periods of time. Possibly, he fancies himself a Thinker."

"But, sir," Pid protested, "If they are even slightly tainted with Alterationism or Shapelessness, why send them on this expedition?"

The Chief hesitated before answering. "There are plenty of Glom I could trust," he said slowly. "But those two have certain qualities of resourcefulness and imagination that will be needed on this expedition." He sighed. "I really don't understand why those qualities are usually linked with Shapelessness."

"Yes, sir," Pid said.

"Just watch them."

"Yes, sir," Pid said again, and saluted, realizing that the interview was at an end. In his body pouch he felt the dormant Displacer, ready to transform the enemy's power source into a bridge across space for the Glom hordes.

"Good luck," the Chief said. "I'm sure you'll need it."

The ship dropped silently toward the surface of the enemy planet. Ger the Detector analyzed the clouds below, and fed data into the Camouflage Unit. The Unit went to work. Soon the ship looked, to all outward appearances, like a cirrus formation.

Pid allowed the ship to drift slowly toward the surface of the mystery planet. He was in Optimum Pilot's Shape now, the most efficient of the four shapes alloted to the Pilot Caste. Blind, deaf, and dumb, an extension of his controls, all his attention was directed toward matching the velocities of the high-flying clouds, staying among them, becoming a part of them.

Ger remained rigidly in one of the two shapes alloted to Detectors. He fed data into the Camouflage Unit, and the descending ship slowly altered into an alto-cumulus.

There was no sign of activity from the enemy planet.

Ilg located an atomic power source, and fed the data to Pid. The Pilot altered course. He had reached the lowest level of clouds, barely a mile above the surface of the planet. Now his ship looked like a fat, fleecy cumulus.

And still there was no sign of alarm. The unknown fate that had overtaken twenty previous expeditions still had not showed itself.

Dusk crept across the face of the planet as Pid maneuvered near the atomic power installation. He avoided the surrounding homes and hovered over a clump of woods.

Darkness fell, and the green planet's lone moon was veiled in clouds.

One cloud floated lower.

And landed.

"Quick, everyone out!" Pid shouted, detaching himself from the ship's controls. He assumed the Pilot's Shape best suited for running, and raced out of the hatch. Ger and Ilg hurried after him. They stopped fifty yards from the ship, and waited.

Inside the ship a circuit closed. There was a silent shudder, and the ship began to melt. Plastic dissolved, metal crumpled. Soon the ship was a great pile of junk, and still the process went on. Big fragments broke into smaller fragments, and split, and split again.

Pid felt suddenly helpless, watching his ship scuttle itself. He was a Pilot, of the Pilot Caste. His father had been a Pilot, and his father before him, stretching back to the hazy past when the Glom had first constructed ships. He had spent his entire childhood around ships, his entire manhood flying them.

Now, shipless, he was naked in an alien world.

In a few minutes there was only a mound of dust to show where the ship had been. The night wind scattered it through the forest. And then there was nothing at all.

They waited. Nothing happened. The wind sighed and the trees creaked. Squirrels chirped, and birds stirred in their nests.

An acorn fell to the ground.

Pid heaved a sigh of relief and sat down. The twenty-first Glom expedition had landed safely.

There was nothing to be done until morning, so Pid began to make plans. They had landed as close to the atomic power installation as they dared. Now they would have to get closer. Somehow, one of them had to get very near the reactor room, in order to activate the Displacer.

Difficult. But Pid felt certain of success. After all, the Glom were strong on ingenuity.

Strong on ingenuity, he thought bitterly, but terribly short of radioactives. That was another reason why this expedition was so important. There was little radioactive fuel left, on any of the Glom worlds.

Ages ago, the Glom had spent their store of radioactives spreading throughout their neighbor worlds, occupying the ones that they could live on. Colonization barely kept up with the mounting birthrate. New worlds were constantly needed.

This particular world, discovered in a scouting expedition, was needed. It suited the Glom perfectly. But it was too far away. They didn't have enough fuel to mount a conquering space fleet.

Luckily, there was another way. A better way.

Over the centuries, the Glom scientists had developed the Displacer. A triumph of Identity Engineering, the Displacer allowed mass to be moved instantaneously between any two linked points.

One end was set up at Glom's sole atomic energy plant. The other end had to be placed in proximity to another atomic power source, and activated. Diverted power then flowed through both ends, was modified, and modified again.

Then, through the miracle of Identity Engineering, the Glom could *step* through from planet to planet; or pour through in a great, overwhelming wave.

It was quite simple. But twenty expeditions had failed to set up the Earth-end Displacer.

What had happened to them was not known.

For no Glom ship had ever returned to tell.

Before dawn they crept through the woods, taking on the coloration of the plants around them. Their Displacers pulsed feebly, sensing the nearness of atomic energy.

A tiny, four-legged creature darted in front of them. Instantly, Ger grew four legs and a long, streamlined body and gave chase.

"Ger! Come back here!" Pid howled at the Detector, throwing caution to the winds.

Ger overtook the animal and knocked it down. He tried to bite it, but he had neglected to grow teeth. The animal jumped free, and vanished into the underbrush. Ger thrust out a set of teeth and bunched his muscles for a leap.

"Ger!"

Reluctantly, the Detector turned away. He loped silently back to Pid.

"I was hungry," he said.

"You were not," Pid said sternly.

"Was," Ger mumbled, writhing with embarrassment.

Pid remembered what the Chief had told him. Ger certainly did have Hunter tendencies. He would have to watch him more closely.

"We'll have no more of that," Pid said. "Remember—the lure of Exotic Shapes is not sanctioned. Be content with the shape you were born to."

Ger nodded, and melted back into the underbrush. They moved on.

At the extreme edge of the woods they could observe the atomic energy installation. Pid disguised himself as a clump of shrubbery, and Ger formed himself into an old log. Ilg, after a moment's thought, became a young oak.

The installation was in the form of a long, low building, surrounded by a metal fence. There was a gate, and guards in front of it.

The first job, Pid thought, was to get past that gate. He began to consider ways and means.

From the fragmentary reports of the survey parties, Pid knew that, in some ways, this race of Men were like the Glom. They had pets, as the Glom did, and homes and children, and a culture. The inhabitants were skilled mechanically, as were the Glom.

But there were terrific differences. The Men were of fixed and immutable forms, like stones or trees. And to compensate, their planet boasted a fantastic array of species, types, and kinds. This was completely unlike Glom, which had only eight distinct forms of animal life.

And evidently, the Men were skilled at detecting invaders, Pid thought. He wished he knew how the other expeditions had failed. It would make his job much easier.

A Man lurched past them on two incredibly stiff legs. Rigidity was evident in his every move. Without looking, he hurried past.

"I know," Ger said, after the creature had moved away. "I'll disguise myself as a Man, walk through the gate to the reactor room, and activate my Displacer."

"You can't speak their language," Pid pointed out.

"I won't speak at all. I'll ignore them. Look." Quickly Ger shaped himself into a Man.

"That's not bad," Pid said.

Ger tried a few practice steps, copying the bumpy walk of the Man.

"But I'm afraid it won't work," Pid said.

"It's perfectly logical," Ger pointed out.

"I know. Therefore the other expeditions must have tried it. And none of them came back."

There was no arguing that. Ger flowed back into the shape of a log. "What, then?" he asked.

"Let me think," Pid said.

Another creature lurched past, on four legs instead of two. Pid recognized it as a Dog, a pet of Man. He watched it carefully.

The Dog ambled to the gate, head down, in no particular hurry. It walked through, unchallenged, and lay down in the grass.

"Hmm," Pid said.

They watched. One of the Men walked past, and touched the Dog on the head. The Dog stuck out its tongue, and rolled over on its side.

"I can do that," Ger said excitedly. He started to flow into the shape of a Dog.

"No, wait," Pid said. "We'll spend the rest of the day thinking it over. This is too important to rush into."

Ger subsided sulkily.

"Come on, let's move back," Pid said. He and Ger started into the woods. Then he remembered Ilg.

"Ilg?" he called softly.

There was no answer.

"Ilg!"

"What? Oh, yes," an oak tree said, and melted into a bush. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"We're moving back," Pid said. "Were you, by any chance, Thinking?"

"Oh, no," Ilg assured him. "Just resting."

Pid let it go at that. There was too much else to worry about.

They discussed it for the rest of the day, hidden in the deepest part of the woods. The only alternatives seemed to be Man or Dog. A Tree couldn't walk past the gates, since that was not in the nature of Trees. Nor could anything else, and escape notice.

Going as a Man seemed too risky. They decided that Ger would sally out in the morning as a Dog.

"Now get some sleep," Pid said.

Obediently his two crewmen flattened out, going immediately Shapeless. But Pid had a more difficult time.

Everything looked too easy. Why wasn't the atomic installation better guarded? Certainly the Men must have learned something from the expeditions they had captured in the past. Or had they killed them without asking any questions?

You couldn't tell what an alien would do.

Was that open gate a trap?

Wearily he flowed into a comfortable position on the lumpy ground. Then he pulled himself

together hastily.

He had gone Shapeless!

Comfort had nothing to do with duty, he reminded himself, and firmly took a Pilot's Shape.

But Pilot's Shape wasn't constructed for sleeping on damp, bumpy ground. Pid spent a restless night, thinking of ships, and wishing he were flying one.

Pid awoke in the morning tired and ill-tempered. He nudged Ger.

"Let's get this over with," he said.

Ger flowed gaily to his feet.

"Come on, Ilg," Pid said angrily, looking around. "Wake up."

There was no reply.

"Ilg!" he called.

Still there was no reply.

"Help me look for him," Pid said to Ger. "He must be around here somewhere."

Together they tested every bush, tree, log, and shrub in the vicinity. But none of them was Ilg.

Pid began to feel a cold panic run through him. What could have happened to the Radioman?

"Perhaps he decided to go through the gate on his own," Ger suggested.

Pid considered the possibility. It seemed unlikely. Ilg had never shown much initiative. He had always been content to follow orders.

They waited. But midday came, and there was still no sign of Ilg.

"We can't wait any longer," Pid said, and they started through the woods. Pid wondered if Ilg *had* tried to get through the gates on his own. Those quiet types often concealed a foolhardy streak.

But there was nothing to show that Ilg had been successful. He would have to assume that the Radioman was dead, or captured by the Men.

That left two of them to activate a Displacer.

And still he didn't know what had happened to the other expeditions.

At the edge of the woods, Ger turned himself into a facsimile of a Dog. Pid inspected him carefully.

"A little less tail," he said.

Ger shortened his tail.

"More ears."

Ger lengthened his ears.

"Now even them up." He inspected the finished product. As far as he could tell, Ger was perfect, from the tip of his tail to his wet, black nose.

"Good luck," Pid said.

"Thanks." Cautiously Ger moved out of the woods, walking in the lurching style of Dogs and Men. At the gate the guard called to him. Pid held his breath.

Ger walked past the Man, ignoring him. The Man started to walk over, and Ger broke into a run.

Pid shaped a pair of strong legs for himself, ready to dash if Ger was caught.

But the guard turned back to his gate. Ger stopped running immediately, and strolled quietly toward the main gate.

Pid dissolved his legs with a sigh of relief.

But the main door was closed! Pid hoped the Radioman wouldn't try to open it. That was *not* in the nature of Dogs.

Another Dog came running toward Ger. Ger backed away from him. The Dog approached and sniffed. Ger sniffed back.

Then both of them ran around the building.

That was clever, Pid thought. There was bound to be a door in the rear.

He glanced up at the afternoon sun. As soon as the Displacer was activated, the Glom armies would begin to pour through. By the time the Men recovered from the shock, a million or more Glom troops would be here. With more following.

The day passed slowly, and nothing happened.

Nervously Pid watched the front of the plant. It shouldn't be taking so long, if Ger were successful.

Late into the night he waited. Men walked in and out of the installation, and Dogs barked around the gates. But Ger did not appear.

Ger had failed. Ilg was gone. Only he was left.

And *still* he didn't know what had happened.

By morning, Pid was in complete despair. He knew that the twenty-first Glom expedition to this planet was near the point of complete failure. Now it was all up to him.

He decided to sally out boldly in the shape of a Man. It was the only possibility left.

He saw that workers were arriving in great numbers, rushing through the gates. Pid wondered if he should try to mingle with them, or wait until there was less commotion. He decided to take advantage of the apparent confusion, and started to shape himself into a Man.

A Dog walked past the woods where he was hiding.

"Hello," the Dog said.

It was Ger!

"What happened?" Pid asked, with a sigh of relief. "Why were you so long? Couldn't you get in?"

"I don't know," Ger said, wagging his tail. "I didn't try."

Pid was speechless.

"I went hunting," Ger said complacently. "This form is ideal for hunting, you know. I went out the rear gate with another Dog."

"But the expedition—your duty—"

"I changed my mind," Ger told him. "You know, Pilot, I never wanted to be a Detector."

"But you were *born* a Detector!"

"That's true," Ger said. "But it doesn't help. I always wanted to be a Hunter."

Pid shook his entire body in annoyance. "You can't," he said, very slowly, as one would explain to a Glomling. "The Hunter Shape is forbidden to you."

"Not here it isn't," Ger said, still wagging his tail.

"Let's have no more of this." Pid said angrily. "Get into that installation and set up your Displacer. I'll try to overlook this heresy."

"I won't," Ger said. "I don't want the Glom here. They'd ruin it for the rest of us."

"He's right," an oak tree said.

"Ilg!" Pid gasped. "Where are you?"

Branches stirred. "I'm right here," Ilg said. "I've been Thinking."

"But—your caste—"

"Pilot," Ger said sadly, "Why don't you wake up? Most of the people on Glom are miserable. Only custom makes us take the caste-shape of our ancestors."

"Pilot," Ilg said, "All Glom are born Shapeless!"

"And being born Shapeless, all Glom should have Freedom of Shape," Ger said.

"Exactly," Ilg said. "But he'll never understand. Now excuse me. I want to Think." And the oak tree was silent.

Pid laughed humorlessly. "The Men will kill you off," he said. "Just as they killed off the rest of the expeditions."

"No one from Glom has been killed," Ger told him. "The other expeditions are right here."

"Alive?"

"Certainly. The Men don't even know we exist. That Dog I was hunting with is a Glom from the nineteenth expedition. There are hundreds of us here, Pilot. We like it."

Pid tried to absorb it all. He had always known that the lower castes were lax in caste-consciousness. But this—this was preposterous!

This planet's secret menace was—freedom!

"Join us, Pilot," Ger said. "We've got a paradise here. Do you know how many species there are on this planet? An uncountable number! There's a shape to suit every need!"

Pid shook his head. There was no shape to suit *his* need. He was a Pilot.

But Men were unaware of the presence of the Glom. Getting near the reactor would be simple!

"The Glom Supreme Council will take care of all of you," he snarled, and shaped himself into a Dog. "I'm going to set up the Displacer myself."

He studied himself for a moment, bared his teeth at Ger, and loped toward the gate.

The Men at the gate didn't even look at him. He slipped through the main door of the building behind a man, and loped down a corridor.

The Displacer in his body pouch pulsed and tugged, leading him toward the reactor room.

He sprinted up a flight of stairs and down another corridor. There were footsteps around the bend, and Pid knew instinctively that Dogs were not allowed inside the building.

He looked around desperately for a hiding place, but the corridor was bare. However, there were several overhead lights in the ceiling.

Pid leaped, and glued himself to the ceiling. He shaped himself into a lighting fixture, and hoped that the Men wouldn't try to find out why he wasn't shining.

Men passed, running.

Pid changed himself into a facsimile of a Man, and hurried on.

He had to get closer.

Another Man came down the corridor. He looked sharply at Pid, started to speak, and then sprinted away.

Pid didn't know what was wrong, but he broke into a full sprint. The Displacer in his body pouch throbbed and pulsed, telling him he had almost reached the critical distance.

Suddenly a terrible doubt assailed his mind. *All the expeditions had deserted! Every single Glom!*

He slowed slightly.

Freedom of Shape ... that was a strange notion. A disturbing notion.

And obviously a device of The Shapeless One, he told himself, and rushed on.

At the end of the corridor was a gigantic bolted door. Pid stared at it.

Footsteps hammered down the corridor, and Men were shouting.

What was wrong? How had they detected him? Quickly he examined himself, and ran his fingers across his face.

He had forgotten to mold any features.

In despair he pulled at the door. He took the tiny Displacer out of his pouch, but the pulse beat wasn't quite strong enough. He had to get closer to the reactor.

He studied the door. There was a tiny crack running under it. Pid went quickly Shapeless and flowed under, barely squeezing the Displacer through.

Inside the room he found another bolt on the inside of the door. He jammed it into place, and looked around for something to prop against the door.

It was a tiny room. On one side was a lead door, leading toward the reactor. There was a small window on another side, and that was all.

Pid looked at the Displacer. The pulse beat was right. At last he was close enough. Here the Displacer could work, drawing and altering the energy from the reactor. All he had to do was activate it.

But they had all deserted, every one of them.

Pid hesitated. *All Glom are born Shapeless*. That was true. Glom children were amorphous, until old enough to be instructed in the caste-shape of their ancestors. But Freedom of Shape?

Pid considered the possibilities. To be able to take on any shape he wanted, without interference! On this paradise planet he could fulfill any ambition, become anything, do anything.

Nor would he be lonely. There were other Glom here as well, enjoying the benefits of Freedom of Shape.

The Men were beginning to break down the door. Pid was still uncertain.

What should he do? Freedom ...

But not for him, he thought bitterly. It was easy enough to be a Hunter or a Thinker. But he was a Pilot. Piloting was his life and love. How could he do that here?

Of course, the Men had ships. He could turn into a Man, find a ship ...

Never. Easy enough to become a Tree or a Dog. He could never pass successfully as a Man.

The door was beginning to splinter from repeated blows.

Pid walked to the window to take a last look at the planet before activating the Displacer.

He looked—and almost collapsed from shock.

It was really true! He hadn't fully understood what Ger had meant when he said that there were species on this planet to satisfy every need. *Every* need! Even his!

Here he could satisfy a longing of the Pilot Caste that went even deeper than Piloting.

He looked again, then smashed the Displacer to the floor. The door burst open, and in the same instant he flung himself through the window.

The Men raced to the window and stared out. But they were unable to understand what they saw.

There was only a great white bird out there, flapping awkwardly but with increasing strength, trying to overtake a flight of birds in the distance.

SPECIALIST

THE PHOTON storm struck without warning, pouncing upon the Ship from behind a bank of giant red stars. Eye barely had time to flash a last-second warning through Talker before it was upon them.

It was Talker's third journey into deep space, and his first light-pressure storm. He felt a sudden pang of fear as the Ship yawed violently, caught the force of the wavefront, and careened end for end. Then the fear was gone, replaced by a strong pulse of excitement.

Why should he be afraid, he asked himself—hadn't he been trained for just this sort of emergency?

He had been talking to Feeder when the storm hit, but he cut off the conversation abruptly. He hoped Feeder would be all right. It was the youngster's first deep-space trip.

The wirelike filaments that made up most of Talker's body were extended throughout the Ship. Quickly he withdrew all except the ones linking him to Eye, Engine, and the Walls. This was strictly their job now. The rest of the Crew would have to shift for themselves until the storm was over.

Eye had flattened his disklike body against a Wall, and had one seeing organ extended outside the Ship. For greater concentration, the rest of his seeing organs were collapsed, clustered against his body.

Through Eye's seeing organ, Talker watched the storm. He translated Eye's purely visual image into a direction for Engine, who shoved the Ship around to meet the waves. At appreciably the same time, Talker translated direction into velocity for the Walls who stiffened to meet the shocks.

The coordination was swift and sure—Eye measuring the waves, Talker relaying the messages to Engine and Walls, Engine driving the ship nose-first into the waves, and Walls bracing to meet the shock.

Talker forgot any fear he might have had in the swiftly functioning teamwork. He had no time to think. As the Ship's communication system, he had to translate and flash his messages at top speed, coordinating information and directing action.

In a matter of minutes, the storm was over.

"All right," Talker said. "Let's see if there was any damage." His filaments had become tangled during the storm, but he untwisted and extended them through the Ship, plugging everyone into circuit. "Engine?"

"I'm fine," Engine said. The tremendous old fellow had dampened his plates during the storm, easing down the atomic explosions in his stomach. No storm could catch an experienced spacer like Engine unaware.

"Walls?"

The Walls reported one by one, and this took a long time. There were almost a thousand of them, thin, rectangular fellows making up the entire skin of the Ship. Naturally, they had reinforced their edges during the storm, giving the whole Ship resiliency. But one or two were dented badly.

Doctor announced that he was all right. He removed Talker's filament from his head, taking himself out of circuit, and went to work on the dented Walls. Made mostly of hands, Doctor had clung to an Accumulator during the storm.

"Let's go a little faster now," Talker said, remembering that there still was the problem of determining where they were. He opened the circuit to the four Accumulators. "How are you?" he asked.

There was no answer. The Accumulators were asleep. They had had their receptors open during the storm and were bloated on energy. Talker twitched his filaments around them, but they didn't stir.

"Let me," Feeder said. Feeder had taken quite a beating before planting his suction cups to a Wall, but his cockiness was intact. He was the only member of the Crew who never needed Doctor's attention; his body was quite capable of repairing itself.

He scuttled across the floor on a dozen or so tentacles, and booted the nearest Accumulator. The big, conial storage unit opened one eye, then closed it again. Feeder kicked him again, getting no response. He reached for the Accumulator's safety valve and drained off some energy.

"Stop that," the Accumulator said.

"Then wake up and report," Talker told him.

The Accumulators said testily that they were all right, as any fool could see. They had been anchored to the floor during the storm.

The rest of the inspection went quickly. Thinker was fine, and Eye was ecstatic over the beauty of the storm. There was only one casualty.

Pusher was dead. Bipedal, he didn't have the stability of the rest of the Crew. The storm had caught him in the middle of a floor, thrown him against a stiffened Wall, and broken several of his important bones. He was beyond Doctor's skill to repair.

They were silent for a while. It was always serious when a part of the Ship died. The Ship was a cooperative unit, composed entirely of the Crew. The loss of any member was a blow to all the rest.

It was especially serious now. They had just delivered a cargo to a port several thousand light-years from Galactic Center. There was no telling where they might be.

Eye crawled to a Wall and extended a seeing organ outside. The Walls let it through, then sealed around it. Eye's organ pushed out, far enough from the Ship so he could view the entire sphere of stars. The picture traveled through Talker, who gave it to Thinker.

Thinker lay in one corner of the room, a great shapeless blob of protoplasm. Within him were all the memories of his space-going ancestors. He considered the picture, compared it rapidly with others stored in his cells, and said, "No galactic planets within reach."

Talker automatically translated for everyone. It was what they had feared.

Eye, with Thinker's help, calculated that they were several hundred light-years off their course, on the galactic periphery.

Every Crew member knew what that meant. Without a Pusher to boost the Ship to a multiple of the speed of light, they would never get home. The trip back, without a Pusher, would take longer than most of their lifetimes.

"What would you suggest?" Talker asked Thinker.

This was too vague a question for the literal-minded Thinker. He asked to have it rephrased.

"What would be our best line of action," Talker asked, "to get back to a galactic planet?"

Thinker needed several minutes to go through all the possibilities stored in his cells. In the meantime, Doctor had patched the Walls and was asking to be given something to eat.

"In a little while we'll all eat," Talker said, twitching his tendrils nervously. Even though he was the second youngest Crew member—only Feeder was younger—the responsibility was largely on him. This was still an emergency; he had to coordinate information and direct action.

One of the Walls suggested that they get good and drunk. This unrealistic solution was vetoed at once. It was typical of the Walls' attitude, however. They were fine workers and good shipmates, but happy-go-lucky fellows at best. When they returned to their home planets, they would probably blow all their wages on a spree.

“Loss of the Ship’s Pusher cripples the Ship for sustained faster-than-light speeds,” Thinker began without preamble. “The nearest galactic planet is four hundred and five light-years off.”

Talker translated all this instantly along his wave-packet body.

“Two courses of action are open. First, the Ship can proceed to the nearest galactic planet under atomic power from Engine. This will take approximately two hundred years. Engine might still be alive at this time, although no one else will.

“Second, locate a primitive planet in this region, upon which are latent Pushers. Find one and train him. Have him push the Ship back to galactic territory.”

Thinker was silent, having given all the possibilities he could find in the memories of his ancestors.

They held a quick vote and decided upon Thinker’s second alternative. There was no choice, really. It was the only one which offered them any hope of getting back to their homes.

“All right,” Talker said. “Let’s eat. I think we all deserve it.”

The body of the dead Pusher was shoved into the mouth of Engine, who consumed it at once, breaking down the atoms to energy. Engine was the only member of the Crew who lived on atomic energy.

For the rest, Feeder dashed up and loaded himself from the nearest Accumulator. Then he transformed the food within him into the substances each member ate. His body chemistry changed, altered, adapted, making the different foods for the Crew.

Eye lived entirely on a complex chlorophyll chain. Feeder reproduced this for him, then went over to give Talker his hydrocarbons, and the Walls their chlorine compound. For Doctor he made a facsimile of a silicate fruit that grew on Doctor’s native planet.

Finally, feeding was over and the Ship back in order. The Accumulators were stacked in a corner, blissfully sleeping again. Eye was extending his vision as far as he could, shaping his main seeing organ for high-powered telescopic reception. Even in this emergency, Eye couldn’t resist making verses. He announced that he was at work on a new narrative poem, called *Peripheral Glow*. No one wanted to hear it, so Eye fed it to Thinker, who stored everything, good or bad, right or wrong.

Engine never slept. Filled to the brim on Pusher, he shoved the Ship along at several times the speed of light.

The Walls were arguing among themselves about who had been the drunkest during their last leave.

Talker decided to make himself comfortable. He released his hold on the Walls and swung in the air, his small round body suspended by his crisscrossed network of filaments.

He thought briefly about Pusher. It was strange. Pusher had been everyone’s friend and now he was forgotten. That wasn’t because of indifference; it was because the Ship was a unit. The loss of a member was regretted, but the important thing was for the unit to go on.

The Ship raced through the suns of the periphery.

Thinker laid out a search spiral, calculating their odds on finding a Pusher planet at roughly four to one. In a week they found a planet of primitive Walls. Dropping low, they could see the leathery, rectangular fellows basking in the sun, crawling over rocks, stretching themselves thin in order to float in the breeze.

All the Ship’s Walls heaved a sigh of nostalgia. It was just like home.

These Walls on the planet hadn’t been contacted by a galactic team yet, and were still unaware of their great destiny—to join in the vast Cooperation of the Galaxy.

There were plenty of dead worlds in the spiral, and worlds too young to bear life. They found a

planet of Talkers. The Talkers had extended their spidery communication lines across half a continent.

Talker looked at them eagerly, through Eye. A wave of self-pity washed over him. He remembered home, his family, his friends. He thought of the tree he was going to buy when he got back.

For a moment, Talker wondered what he was doing here, part of a Ship in a far corner of the Galaxy.

He shrugged off the mood. They were bound to find a Pusher planet, if they looked long enough.

At least, he hoped so.

There was a long stretch of arid worlds as the Ship speeded through the unexplored periphery. Then a planetful of primeval Engines, swimming in a radioactive ocean.

"This is rich territory," Feeder said to Talker. "Galactic should send a Contact party here."

"They probably will, after we get back," Talker said.

They were good friends, above and beyond the all-enveloping friendship of the Crew. It wasn't only because they were the youngest Crew members, although that had something to do with it. They both had the same kind of functions, and that made for a certain rapport. Talker translated languages; Feeder transformed foods. Also, they looked somewhat alike. Talker was a central core with radiating filaments; Feeder was a central core with radiating tentacles.

Talker thought that Feeder was the next most aware being on the Ship. He was never really able to understand how some of the others carried on the processes of consciousness.

More suns, more planets. Engine started to overheat. Usually, Engine was used only for taking off and landing, and for fine maneuvering in a planetary group. Now he had been running continuously for weeks, both over and under the speed of light. The strain was telling on him.

Feeder, with Doctor's help, rigged a cooling system for him. It was crude, but it had to suffice. Feeder rearranged nitrogen, oxygen, and hydrogen atoms to make a coolant for the system. Doctor diagnosed a long rest for Engine. He said that the gallant old fellow couldn't stand the strain for more than a week.

The search continued, with the Crew's spirits gradually dropping. They all realized that Pushers were rather rare in the Galaxy, as compared to the fertile Walls and Engines.

The Walls were getting pock-marked from interstellar dust. They complained that they would need a full beauty treatment when they got home. Talker assured them that the company would pay for it.

Even Eye was getting bloodshot from staring into space so continuously.

They dipped over another planet. Its characteristics were flashed to Thinker, who mulled over them.

Closer, and they could make out the forms.

Pushers! Primitive Pushers!

They zoomed back into space to make plans. Feeder produced twenty-three different kinds of intoxicants for a celebration.

The Ship wasn't fit to function for three days.

"Everyone ready now?" Talker asked, a bit fuzzily. He had a hangover that burned all along his nerve ends. What a drunk he had thrown! He had a vague recollection of embracing Engine, and inviting him to share his tree when they got home.

He shuddered at the idea.

The rest of the Crew were pretty shaky, too. The Walls were letting air leak into space; they were just too wobbly to seal their edges properly. Doctor had passed out.

But the worst off was Feeder. Since his system could adapt to any type of fuel except atomic, he

had been sampling every batch he made, whether it was an unbalanced iodine, pure oxygen, or a supercharged ester. He was really miserable. His tentacles, usually a healthy aqua, were shot through with orange streaks. His system was working furiously, purging itself of everything, and Feeder was suffering the effects of the purge.

The only sober ones were Thinker and Engine. Thinker didn't drink, which was unusual for a spacer, though typical of Thinker, and Engine couldn't.

They listened while Thinker reeled off some astounding facts. From Eye's pictures of the planet's surface, Thinker had detected the presence of metallic construction. He put forth the alarming suggestion that these Pushers had constructed a mechanical civilization.

"That's impossible," three of the Walls said flatly, and most of the Crew were inclined to agree with them. All the metal they had ever seen had been buried in the ground or lying around in worthless oxidized chunks.

"Do you mean that they make things out of metal?" Talker demanded. "Out of just plain dead metal? What could they make?"

"They couldn't make anything," Feeder said positively. "It would break down constantly. I mean metal doesn't *know* when it's weakening."

But it seemed to be true. Eye magnified his pictures, and everyone could see that the Pushers had made vast shelters, vehicles, and other articles from inanimate material.

The reason for this was not readily apparent, but it wasn't a good sign. However, the really hard part was over. The Pusher planet had been found. All that remained was the relatively easy job of convincing a native Pusher.

That shouldn't be too difficult. Talker knew that cooperation was the keystone of the Galaxy, even among primitive peoples.

The Crew decided not to land in a populated region. Of course, there was no reason not to expect a friendly greeting, but it was the job of a Contact Team to get in touch with them as a race. All they wanted was an individual.

Accordingly, they picked out a sparsely populated landmass, drifting in while that side of the planet was dark.

They were able to locate a solitary Pusher almost at once.

Eye adapted his vision to see in the dark, and they followed the Pusher's movements. He lay down, after a while, beside a small fire. Thinker told them that this was a well-known resting habit of Pushers.

Just before dawn, the Walls opened, and Feeder, Talker, and Doctor came out.

Feeder dashed forward and tapped the creature on the shoulder. Talker followed with a communication tendril.

The Pusher opened his seeing organs, blinked them, and made a movement with his eating organ. Then he leaped to his feet and started to run.

The three Crew members were amazed. The Pusher hadn't even waited to find out what the three of them wanted!

Talker extended a filament rapidly, and caught the Pusher, fifty feet away, by a limb. The Pusher fell.

"Treat him gently," Feeder said. "He might be startled by our appearance." He twitched his tendrils at the idea of a Pusher—one of the strangest sights in the Galaxy, with his multiple organs—being startled at someone else's appearance.

Feeder and Doctor scurried to the fallen Pusher, picked him up, and carried him back to the Ship.

The Walls sealed again. They released the Pusher and prepared to talk.

As soon as he was free, the Pusher sprang to his limbs and ran at the place where the Walls had sealed. He pounded against them frantically, his eating organ open and vibrating.

"Stop that," the Wall said. He bulged, and the Pusher tumbled to the floor. Instantly, he jumped up and started to run forward.

"Stop him," Talker said. "He might hurt himself."

One of the Accumulators woke up enough to roll into the Pusher's path. The Pusher fell, got up again, and ran on.

Talker had his filaments in the front of the Ship also, and he caught the Pusher in the bow. The Pusher started to tear at his tendrils, and Talker let go hastily.

"Plug him into the communication system!" Feeder shouted. "Maybe we can reason with him!"

Talker advanced a filament toward the Pusher's head, waving it in the universal sign of communication. But the Pusher continued his amazing behavior, jumping out of the way. He had a piece of metal in his hand and he was waving it frantically.

"What do you think he's going to do with that?" Feeder asked. The Pusher started to attack the side of the Ship, pounding at one of the Walls. The Wall stiffened instinctively and the metal snapped.

"Leave him alone," Talker said. "Give him a chance to calm down."

Talker consulted with Thinker, but they couldn't decide what to do about the Pusher. He wouldn't accept communication. Every time Talker extended a filament, the Pusher showed all the signs of violent panic. Temporarily, it was an impasse.

Thinker vetoed the plan of finding another Pusher on the planet. He considered this Pusher's behavior typical; nothing would be gained by approaching another. Also, a planet was supposed to be contacted only by a Contact Team.

If they couldn't communicate with this Pusher, they never would with another on the planet.

"I think I know what the trouble is," Eye said. He crawled up on an Accumulator. "These Pushers have evolved a mechanical civilization. Consider for a minute how they went about it. They developed the use of their fingers, like Doctor, to shape metal. They utilized their seeing organs, like myself. And probably countless other organs." He paused for effect.

"These Pushers have become unspecialized!"

They argued over it for several hours. The Walls maintained that no intelligent creature could be unspecialized. It was unknown in the Galaxy. But the evidence was before them—The Pusher cities, their vehicles ... This Pusher, exemplifying the rest, seemed capable of a multitude of things.

He was able to do everything except Push!

Thinker supplied a partial explanation. "This is not a primitive planet. It is relatively old and should have been in the Cooperation thousands of years ago. Since it was not, the Pushers upon it were robbed of their birthright. Their ability, their specialty was to Push, but there was nothing *to* Push. Naturally, they have developed a deviant culture.

"Exactly what this culture is, we can only guess. But on the basis of the evidence, there is reason to believe that these Pushers are—uncooperative."

Thinker had a habit of uttering the most shattering statement in the quietest possible way.

"It is entirely possible," Thinker went on inexorably, "that these Pushers will have nothing to do with us. In which case, our chances are approximately 283 to one against finding another Pusher planet."

"We can't be sure he won't cooperate," Talker said, "until we get him into communication." He found it almost impossible to believe that any intelligent creature would refuse to cooperate willingly.

"But how?" Feeder asked. They decided upon a course of action. Doctor walked slowly up to the Pusher, who backed away from him. In the meantime, Talker extended a filament outside the Ship, around, and in again, behind the Pusher.

The Pusher backed against a Wall—and Talker shoved the filament through the Pusher's head, into the communication socket in the center of his brain.

The Pusher collapsed.

When he came to, Feeder and Doctor had to hold the Pusher's limbs, or he would have ripped out the communication line. Talker exercised his skill in learning the Pusher's language.

It wasn't too hard. All Pusher languages were of the same family, and this was no exception. Talker was able to catch enough surface thoughts to form a pattern.

He tried to communicate with the Pusher.

The Pusher was silent.

"I think he needs food," Feeder said. They remembered that it had been almost two days since they had taken the Pusher on board. Feeder worked up some standard Pusher food and offered it.

"My God! A steak!" the Pusher said.

The Crew cheered along Talker's communication circuits. The Pusher had said his first words!

Talker examined the words and searched his memory. He knew about two hundred Pusher languages and many more simple variations. He found that this Pusher was speaking a cross between two Pusher tongues.

After the Pusher had eaten, he looked around. Talker caught his thoughts and broadcast them to the Crew.

The Pusher had a queer way of looking at the Ship. He saw it as a riot of colors. The walls undulated. In front of him was something resembling a gigantic spider, colored black and green, with his web running all over the Ship and into the heads of all the creatures. He saw Eye as a strange, naked little animal, something between a skinned rabbit and an egg yolk—whatever those things were.

Talker was fascinated by the new perspective the Pusher's mind gave him. He had never seen things that way before. But now that the Pusher was pointing it out, Eye *was* a pretty funny looking creature.

They settled down to communication.

"What in hell *are* you things?" the Pusher asked, much calmer now than he had been during the two days. "Why did you grab me? Have I gone nuts?"

"No," Talker said, "you are not psychotic. We are a galactic trading ship. We were blown off our course by a storm, and our Pusher was killed."

"Well, what does that have to do with me?"

"We would like you to join our crew," Talker said, "to be our new Pusher."

The Pusher thought it over after the situation was explained to him. Talker could catch the feeling of conflict in the Pusher's thoughts. He hadn't decided whether to accept this as a real situation or not. Finally, the Pusher decided that he wasn't crazy.

"Look, boys," he said, "I don't know what you are or how this makes sense. I have to get out of here. I'm on a furlough, and if I don't get back soon, the US Army's going to be very interested."

Talker asked the Pusher to give him more information about "army," and he fed it to Thinker.

"These Pushers engage in personal combat," was Thinker's conclusion.

"But *why?*" Talker asked. Sadly he admitted to himself that Thinker might have been right; the

Pusher didn't show many signs of willingness to cooperate.

"I'd like to help you lads out," Pusher said, "but I don't know where you get the idea that I could push anything this size. You'd need a whole division of tanks just to budge it."

"Do you approve of these wars?" Talker asked, getting a suggestion from Thinker.

"Nobody likes war—not those who have to do the dying at least."

"Then why do you fight them?"

The Pusher made a gesture with his eating organ, which Eye picked up and sent to Thinker. "It's kill or be killed. You guys know what war is, don't you?"

"We don't have any wars," Talker said.

"You're lucky," the Pusher said bitterly. "We do. Plenty of them."

"Of course," Talker said. He had the full explanation from Thinker now. "Would you like to end them?"

"Of course I would."

"Then come with us. Be our Pusher."

The Pusher stood up and walked up to an Accumulator. He sat down on it and doubled the ends of his upper limbs.

"How the hell can I stop all wars?" the Pusher demanded. "Even if I went to the big shots and told them—"

"You won't have to," Talker said. "All you have to do is come with us. Push us to our base. Galactic will send a Contact Team to your planet. That will end your wars."

"The hell you say," the Pusher replied. "You boys are stranded here, huh? Good enough. No monsters are going to take over Earth."

Bewildered, Talker tried to understand the reasoning. Had he said something wrong? Was it possible that the Pusher didn't understand him?

"I thought you wanted to end wars," Talker said.

"Sure I do. But I don't want anyone *making* us stop. I'm no traitor. I'd rather fight."

"No one will make you stop. You will just stop because there will be no further need for fighting."

"Do you know why we're fighting?"

"It's obvious."

"Yeah? What's your explanation?"

"You Pushers have been separated from the main stream of the Galaxy," Talker explained. "You have your specialty—Pushing—but nothing to Push. Accordingly, you have no real jobs. You play with things—metal, inanimate objects—but find no real satisfaction. Robbed of your true vocation, you fight from sheer frustration.

"Once you find your place in the galactic Cooperation—and I assure you that it is an important place—your fighting will stop. Why should you fight, which is an unnatural occupation, when you can Push? Also, your mechanical civilization will end, since there will be no need for it."

The Pusher shook his head in what Talker guessed was a gesture of confusion. "What is this pushing?"

Talker told him as best he could. Since the job was out of his scope, he had only a general idea of what a Pusher did.

"You mean to say that *that* is what every Earthman should be doing?"

"Of course," Talker said. "It is your great specialty."

The Pusher thought about it for several minutes. "I think you want a physicist or a mentalist or

something. I could never do anything like that. I'm a junior architect. And besides—well, it's difficult to explain."

But Talker had already caught Pusher's objection. He saw a Pusher female in his thoughts. No, two, three. And he caught a feeling of loneliness, strangeness. The Pusher was filled with doubts. He was afraid.

"When we reach galactic," Talker said, hoping it was the right thing, "you can meet other Pushers. Pusher females, too. All you Pushers look alike, so you should become friends with them. As far as loneliness in the Ship goes—it just doesn't exist. You don't understand the Cooperation yet. No one is lonely in the Cooperation."

The Pusher was still considering the idea of there being other Pushers. Talker couldn't understand why he was so startled at that. The Galaxy was filled with Pushers, Feeders, Talkers, and many other species, endlessly duplicated.

"I can't believe that anybody could end all war," Pusher said. "How do I know you're not lying?"

Talker felt as if he had been struck in the core. Thinker must have been right when he said these Pushers would be uncooperative. Was this going to be the end of Talker's career? Were he and the rest of the Crew going to spend the rest of their lives in space, because of the stupidity of a bunch of Pushers?

Even thinking this, Talker was able to feel sorry for the Pusher. It must be terrible, he thought. Doubting, uncertain, never trusting anyone. If these Pushers didn't find their place in the Galaxy, they would exterminate themselves. Their place in the Cooperation was long overdue.

"What can I do to convince you?" Talker asked.

In despair, he opened all the circuits to the Pusher. He let the Pusher see Engine's good-natured gruffness, the devil-may-care humor of the Walls; he showed him Eye's poetic attempts, and Feeder's cocky good nature. He opened his own mind and showed the Pusher a picture of his home planet, his family, the tree he was planning to buy when he got home.

The pictures told the story of all of them, from different planets, representing different ethics, united by a common bond—the galactic Cooperation.

The Pusher watched it all in silence.

After a while, he shook his head. The thought accompanying the gesture was uncertain, weak—but negative.

Talker told the Walls to open. They did, and the Pusher stared in amazement.

"You may leave," Talker said. "Just remove the communication line and go."

"What will you do?"

"We will look for another Pusher planet."

"Where? Mars? Venus?"

"We don't know. All we can do is hope there is another in this region."

The Pusher looked at the opening, then back at the Crew. He hesitated and his face screwed up in a grimace of indecision.

"All that you showed me was true?"

No answer was necessary.

"All right," the Pusher said suddenly. "I'll go. I'm a damned fool, but I'll go. If this means what you say—it *must* mean what you say!"

Talker saw that the agony of the Pusher's decision had forced him out of contact with reality. He believed that he was in a dream, where decisions are easy and unimportant.

"There's just one little trouble," Pusher said with the lightness of hysteria. "Boys, I'll be damned

if I know how to Push. You said something about faster-than-light? I can't even run the mile in an hour."

"Of course you can Push," Talker assured him, hoping he was right. He knew what a Pusher's abilities were; but this one ...

"Just try it."

"Sure," Pusher agreed. "I'll probably wake up out of this, anyhow."

They sealed the ship for takeoff while Pusher talked to himself.

"Funny," Pusher said. "I thought a camping trip would be a nice way to spend a furlough, and all I do is get nightmares!"

Engine boosted the Ship into the air. The Walls were sealed and Eye was guiding them away from the planet.

"We're in open space now," Talker said. Listening to Pusher, he hoped his mind hadn't cracked. "Eye and Thinker will give a direction, I'll transmit it to you, and you Push along it."

"You're crazy," Pusher mumbled. "You must have the wrong planet. I wish you nightmares would go away."

"You're in the Cooperation now," Talker said desperately. "There's the direction. Push!"

The Pusher didn't do anything for a moment. He was slowly emerging from his fantasy, realizing that he wasn't in a dream, after all. He felt the Cooperation. Eye to Thinker, Thinker to Talker, Talker to Pusher, all inter-coordinated with Walls, and with each other.

"What is this?" Pusher asked. He felt the oneness of the Ship, the great warmth, the closeness achieved only in the Cooperation.

He Pushed.

Nothing happened.

"Try again," Talker begged.

Pusher searched his mind. He found a deep well of doubt and fear. Staring into it, he saw his own tortured face.

Thinker illuminated it for him.

Pushers had lived with this doubt and fear for centuries. Pushers had fought through fear, killed through doubt.

That was where the Pusher organ was!

Human—specialist—Pusher—he entered fully into the Crew, merged with them, threw mental arms around the shoulders of Thinker and Talker.

Suddenly, the Ship shot forward at eight times the speed of light. It continued to accelerate.

WARM

ANDERS lay on his bed, fully dressed except for his shoes and black bow tie, contemplating, with a certain uneasiness, the evening before him. In twenty minutes he would pick up Judy at her apartment, and that was the uneasy part of it.

He had realized, only seconds ago, that he was in love with her.

Well, he'd tell her. The evening would be memorable. He would propose, there would be kisses, and the seal of acceptance would, figuratively speaking, be stamped across his forehead.

Not too pleasant an outlook, he decided. It really would be much more comfortable not to be in love. What had done it? A look, a touch, a thought? It didn't take much, he knew, and stretched his arms for a thorough yawn.

"Help me!" a voice said.

His muscles spasmed, cutting off the yawn in midmoment. He sat upright on the bed, then grinned and lay back again.

"You must help me!" the voice insisted.

Anders sat up, reached for a polished shoe, and fitted it on, giving his full attention to the tying of the laces.

"Can you hear me?" the voice asked. "You can, can't you?"

That did it. "Yes, I can hear you," Anders said, still in a high good humor. "Don't tell me you're my guilty subconscious, attacking me for a childhood trauma I never bothered to resolve. I suppose you want me to join a monastery."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the voice said. "I'm no one's subconscious. I'm *me*. Will you help me?"

Anders believed in voices as much as anyone; that is, he didn't believe in them at all, until he heard them. Swiftly he catalogued the possibilities. Schizophrenia was the best answer, of course, and one in which his colleagues would concur. But Anders had a lamentable confidence in his own sanity. In which case—

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I don't know," the voice answered.

Anders realized that the voice was speaking within his own mind. Very suspicious.

"You don't know who you are," Anders stated. "Very well. *Where* are you?"

"I don't know that, either." The voice paused, and went on. "Look, I know how ridiculous this must sound. Believe me, I'm in some sort of limbo. I don't know how I got here or who I am, but I want desperately to get out. Will you help me?"

Still fighting the idea of a voice speaking within his head, Anders knew that his next decision was vital. He had to accept—or reject—his own sanity.

He accepted it.

"All right," Anders said, lacing the other shoe. "I'll grant that you're a person in trouble, and that you're in some sort of telepathic contact with me. Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"I'm afraid not," the voice said, with infinite sadness. "You'll have to find out for yourself."

"Can you contact anyone else?"

"No."

"Then how can you talk with me?"

"I don't know."

Anders walked to his bureau mirror and adjusted his black bow tie, whistling softly under his breath. Having just discovered that he was in love, he wasn't going to let a little thing like a voice in his mind disturb him.

"I really don't see how I can be of any help," Anders said, brushing a bit of lint from his jacket. "You don't know where you are, and there don't seem to be any distinguishing landmarks. How am I to find you?" He turned and looked around the room to see if he had forgotten anything.

"I'll know when you're close," the voice said. "You were warm just then."

"Just then?" All he had done was look around the room. He did so again, turning his head slowly. Then it happened.

The room, from one angle, looked different. It was suddenly a mixture of muddled colors, instead of the carefully blended pastel shades he had selected. The lines of wall, floor, and ceiling were strangely off proportion, zigzag, unrelated.

Then everything went back to normal.

"You were *very* warm," the voice said.

Anders resisted the urge to scratch his head, for fear of disarranging his carefully combed hair. What he had seen wasn't so strange. Everyone sees one or two things in his life that make him doubt his normality, doubt sanity, doubt his very existence. For a moment the orderly Universe is disarranged and the fabric of belief is ripped.

But the moment passes.

Anders remembered once, as a boy, awakening in his room in the middle of the night. How strange everything had looked! Chairs, table, all out of proportion, swollen in the dark. The ceiling pressing down, as in a dream.

But that also had passed.

"Well, old man," he said, "if I get warm again, tell me."

"I will," the voice in his head whispered. "I'm sure you'll find me."

"I'm glad you're so sure," Anders said gaily, switched off the lights, and left.

Lovely and smiling, Judy greeted him at the door. Looking at her, Anders sensed her knowledge of the moment. Had she felt the change in him, or predicted it? Or was love making him grin like an idiot?

"Would you like a before-party drink?" she asked.

He nodded, and she led him across the room, to the improbable green-and-yellow couch. Sitting down, Anders decided he would tell her when she came back with the drink. No use in putting off the fatal moment. A lemming in love, he told himself.

"You're getting warm again," the voice said.

He had almost forgotten his invisible friend. Or fiend, as the case could well be. What would Judy say if she knew he was hearing voices? Little things like that, he reminded himself, often break up the best of romances.

"Here," she said, handing him a drink.

Still smiling, he noticed. The number two smile—to a prospective suitor, provocative and understanding. It had been preceded, in their relationship, by the number one nice-girl smile, the don't-misunderstand-me smile, to be worn on all occasions, until the correct words have been mumbled.

"That's right," the voice said. "It's in how you look at things."

Look at what? Anders glanced at Judy, annoyed at his thoughts. If he was going to play the lover,

let him play it. Even through the astigmatic haze of love, he was able to appreciate her blue-gray eyes, her fine skin (if one over-looked a tiny blemish on the left temple), her lips, slightly reshaped by lipstick.

"How did your classes go today?" she asked.

Well, of course she'd ask that, Anders thought. Love is marking time.

"All right," he said. "Teaching psychology to young apes—"

"Oh, come now!"

"Warmer," the voice said.

What's the matter with me, Anders wondered. She really is a lovely girl. The *gestalt* that is Judy, a pattern of thoughts, expressions, movements, making up the girl I—

I what?

Love?

Anders shifted his long body uncertainly on the couch. He didn't quite understand how this train of thought had begun. It annoyed him. The analytical young instructor was better off in the classroom. Couldn't science wait until 9:10 in the morning?

"I was thinking about you today," Judy said, and Anders knew that she had sensed the change in his mood.

"Do you see?" the voice asked him. "You're getting much better at it."

"I don't see anything," Anders thought, but the voice was right. It was as though he had a clear line of inspection into Judy's mind. Her feelings were nakedly apparent to him, as meaningless as his room had been in that flash of undistorted thought.

"I really was thinking about you," she repeated.

"Now look," the voice said.

Anders, watching the expressions on Judy's face, felt the strangeness descend on him. He was back in the nightmare perception of that moment in his room. This time it was as though he were watching a machine in a laboratory. The object of this operation was the evocation and preservation of a particular mood. The machine goes through a searching process, invoking trains of ideas to achieve the desired end.

"Oh, were you?" he asked, amazed at his new perspective.

"Yes ... I wondered what you were doing at noon," the reactive machine opposite him on the couch said, expanding its shapely chest slightly.

"Good," the voice said, commending him for his perception.

"Dreaming of you, of course," he said to the flesh-clad skeleton behind the total *gestalt* Judy. The flesh machine rearranged its limbs, widened its mouth to denote pleasure. The mechanism searched through a complex of fears, hopes, worries, through half-remembrances of analogous situations, analogous solutions.

And this was what he loved. Anders saw too clearly and hated himself for seeing. Through his new nightmare perception, the absurdity of the entire room struck him.

"Were you really?" the articulating skeleton asked him.

"You're coming closer," the voice whispered.

To what? The personality? There was no such thing. There was no true cohesion, no depth, nothing except a web of surface reactions, stretched across automatic visceral movements.

He was coming closer to the truth.

"Sure," he said sourly.

The machine stirred, searching for a response.

Anders felt a quick tremor of fear at the sheer alien quality of his viewpoint. His sense of formalism had been sloughed off, his agreed-upon reactions bypassed. What would be revealed next?

He was seeing clearly, he realized, as perhaps no man had ever seen before. It was an oddly exhilarating thought.

But could he still return to normality?

"Can I get you a drink?" the reaction machine asked.

At that moment Anders was as thoroughly out of love as a man could be. Viewing one's intended as a depersonalized, sexless piece of machinery is not especially conducive to love. But it is quite stimulating, intellectually.

Anders didn't want normality. A curtain was being raised and he wanted to see behind it. What was it some Russian scientist—Ouspensky, wasn't it—had said?

"*Think in other categories*."

That was what he was doing, and would continue to do.

"Good-bye," he said suddenly.

The machine watched him, open-mouthed, as he walked out the door. Delayed circuit reactions kept it silent until it heard the elevator door close.

"You were very warm in there," the voice within his head whispered, once he was on the street. "But you still don't understand everything."

"Tell me, then," Anders said, marveling a little at his equanimity. In an hour he had bridged the gap to a completely different viewpoint, yet it seemed perfectly natural.

"I can't," the voice said. "You must find it yourself."

"Well, let's see now," Anders began. He looked around at the masses of masonry, the convention of streets cutting through the architectural piles. "Human life," he said, "is a series of conventions. When you look at a girl, you're supposed to see—a pattern, not the underlying formlessness."

"That's true," the voice agreed, but with a shade of doubt.

"Basically, there is no form. Man produces *gestalts*, and cuts form out of the plethora of nothingness. It's like looking at a set of lines and saying that they represent a figure. We look at a mass of material, extract it from the background, and say it's a man. But in truth, there is no such thing. There are only the humanizing features that we—myopically—attach to it. Matter is conjoined, a matter of viewpoint."

"You're not seeing it now," said the voice.

"Damn it," Anders said. He was certain that he was on the track of something big, perhaps something ultimate. "Everyone's had the experience. At some time in his life, everyone looks at a familiar object and can't make any sense out of it. Momentarily, the *gestalt* fails, but the true moment of sight passes. The mind reverts to the superimposed pattern. Normalcy continues."

The voice was silent. Anders walked on, through the *gestalt* city.

"There's something else, isn't there?" Anders asked.

"Yes."

What could that be, he asked himself. Through clearing eyes, Anders looked at the formality he had called his world.

He wondered momentarily if he would have come to this if the voice hadn't guided him. Yes, he decided after a few moments, it was inevitable.

But who was the voice? And what had he left out?

"Let's see what a party looks like now," he said to the voice.

The party was a masquerade; the guests were all wearing their faces. To Anders, their motives,

individually and collectively, were painfully apparent. Then his vision began to clear further.

He saw that the people weren't truly individual. They were discontinuous lumps of flesh sharing a common vocabulary, yet not even truly discontinuous.

The lumps of flesh were a part of the decoration of the room and almost indistinguishable from it. They were one with the lights, which lent their tiny vision. They were joined to the sounds they made, a few feeble tones out of the great possibility of sound. They blended into the walls.

The kaleidoscopic view came so fast that Anders had trouble sorting his new impressions. He knew now that these people existed only as patterns, on the same basis as the sounds they made and the things they thought they saw.

Gestalts, sifted out of the vast, unbearable real world.

"Where's Judy?" a discontinuous lump of flesh asked him. This particular lump possessed enough nervous mannerisms to convince the other lumps of his reality. He wore a loud tie as further evidence.

"She's sick," Anders said. The flesh quivered into an instant sympathy. Lines of formal mirth shifted to formal woe.

"Hope it isn't anything serious," the vocal flesh remarked.

"You're warmer," the voice said to Anders.

Anders looked at the object in front of him.

"She hasn't long to live," he stated.

The flesh quivered. Stomach and intestines contracted in sympathetic fear. Eyes distended, mouth quivered.

The loud tie remained the same.

"My God! You don't mean it!"

"What are you?" Anders asked quietly.

"What do you mean?" the indignant flesh attached to the tie demanded. Serene within its reality, it gaped at Anders. Its mouth twitched, undeniable proof that it was real and sufficient. "You're drunk," it sneered.

Anders laughed and left the party.

"There is still something you don't know," the voice said. "But you were hot! I could feel you near me."

"What are you?" Anders asked again.

"I don't know," the voice admitted. "I am a person. I am I. I am trapped."

"So are we all," Anders said. He walked on asphalt, surrounded by heaps of concrete, silicates, aluminum and iron alloys. Shapeless, meaningless heaps that made up the *gestalt* city.

And then there were the imaginary lines of demarcation dividing city from city, the artificial boundaries of water and land.

All ridiculous.

"Give me a dime for some coffee, mister?" something asked, a thing indistinguishable from any other thing.

"Old Bishop Berkeley would give a nonexistent dime to your nonexistent presence," Anders said gaily.

"I'm really in a bad way," the voice whined, and Anders perceived that it was no more than a series of modulated vibrations.

"Yes! Go on!" the voice commanded.

"If you could spare me a quarter—" the vibrations said, with a deep pretense at meaning.

No, what was there behind the senseless patterns? Flesh, mass. What was that? All made up of

atoms.

"I'm really hungry," the intricately arranged atoms muttered.

All atoms. Conjoined. There were no true separations between atom and atom. Flesh was stone, stone was light. Anders looked at the masses of atoms that were pretending to solidity, meaning, and reason.

"Can't you help me?" a clump of atoms asked. But the clump was identical with all the other atoms. Once you ignored the superimposed patterns, you could see the atoms were random, scattered.

"I don't believe in you," Anders said.

The pile of atoms was gone.

"Yes!" the voice cried. "Yes!"

"I don't believe in any of it," Anders said. After all, what was an atom?

"Go on!" the voice shouted. "You're hot! Go on!"

What was an atom? An empty space surrounded by an empty space.

Absurd!

"Then it's all false!" Anders said. And he was alone under the stars.

"That's right!" the voice within his head screamed. "Nothing!"

But stars, Anders thought. How can one believe—

The stars disappeared. Anders was in a gray nothingness, a void. There was nothing around him except shapeless gray.

Where was the voice?

Gone.

Anders perceived the delusion behind the grayness, and then there was nothing at all.

Complete nothingness, and himself within it.

Where was he? What did it mean? Anders's mind tried to add it up.

Impossible. *That* couldn't be true.

Again the score was tabulated, but Anders's mind couldn't accept the total. In desperation, the overloaded mind erased the figures, eradicated the knowledge, erased itself.

"Where am I?"

In nothingness. Alone.

Trapped.

"Who am I?"

A voice.

The voice of Anders searched the nothingness, shouted, "Is there anyone here?"

No answer.

But there was someone. All directions were the same, yet moving along one he could make contact ... with someone. The voice of Anders reached back to someone who could save him, perhaps.

"Save me," the voice said to Anders, lying fully dressed on his bed, except for his shoes and black bow tie.

WATCHBIRD

WHEN GELSEN entered, he saw that the rest of the watchbird manufacturers were already present. There were six of them, not counting himself, and the room was blue with expensive cigar smoke.

"Hi, Charlie," one of them called as he came in.

The rest broke off conversation long enough to wave a casual greeting at him. As a watchbird manufacturer, he was a member manufacturer of salvation, he reminded himself wryly. Very exclusive. You must have a certified government contract if you want to save the human race.

"The government representative isn't here yet," one of the men told him. "He's due any minute."

"We're getting the green light," another said.

"Fine." Gelsen found a chair near the door and looked around the room. It was like a convention, or a Boy Scout rally. The six men made up for their lack of numbers by sheer volume. The president of Southern Consolidated was talking at the top of his lungs about watchbird's enormous durability. The two presidents he was talking at were grinning, nodding, one trying to interrupt with the results of a test he had run on watchbird's resourcefulness, the other talking about the new recharging apparatus.

The other three men were in their own little group, delivering what sounded like a panegyric to watchbird.

Gelsen noticed that all of them stood straight and tall, like the saviors they felt they were. He didn't find it funny. Up to a few days ago he had felt that way himself. He had considered himself a pot-bellied, slightly balding saint.

He sighed and lighted a cigarette. At the beginning of the project, he had been as enthusiastic as the others. He remembered saying to Macintyre, his chief engineer, "Mac, a new day is coming. Watchbird is the answer." And Macintyre had nodded very profoundly—another watchbird convert.

How wonderful it had seemed then! A simple, reliable answer to one of mankind's greatest problems, all wrapped and packaged in a pound of incorruptible metal, crystal, and plastics.

Perhaps that was the very reason he was doubting it now. Gelsen suspected that you don't solve human problems so easily. There had to be a catch somewhere.

After all, murder was an old problem, and watchbird too new a solution.

"Gentlemen—" They had been talking so heatedly that they hadn't noticed the government representative entering. Now the room became quiet at once.

"Gentlemen," the plump government man said, "the president, with the consent of Congress, has acted to form a watchbird division for every city and town in the country."

The men burst into a spontaneous shout of triumph. They were going to have their chance to save the world after all, Gelsen thought, and worriedly asked himself what was wrong with that.

He listened carefully as the government man outlined the distribution scheme. The country was to be divided into seven areas, each to be supplied and serviced by one manufacturer. This meant monopoly, of course, but a necessary one. Like the telephone service, it was in the public's best interests. You couldn't have competition in watchbird service. Watchbird was for everyone.

"The president hopes," the representative continued, "that full watchbird service will be installed in the shortest possible time. You will have top priorities on strategic metals, manpower, and so forth."

"Speaking for myself," the president of Southern Consolidated said, "I expect to have the first batch of watchbirds distributed within the week. Production is all set up."

The rest of the men were equally ready. The factories had been prepared to roll out the watchbirds for months now. The final standardized equipment had been agreed upon, and only the presidential go-ahead had been lacking.

"Fine," the representative said. "If that is all, I think we can—is there a question?"

"Yes, sir," Gelsen said. "I want to know if the present model is the one we are going to manufacture."

"Of course," the representative said. "It's the most advanced."

"I have an objection." Gelsen stood up. His colleagues were glaring coldly at him. Obviously he was delaying the advent of the golden age.

"What is your objection?" the representative asked.

"First, let me say that I am one hundred percent in favor of a machine to stop murder. It's been needed for a long time. I object only to the watchbird's learning circuits. They serve, in effect, to animate the machine and give it a pseudoconsciousness. I can't approve of that."

"But, Mr. Gelsen, you yourself testified that the watchbird would not be completely efficient unless such circuits were introduced. Without them, the watchbirds could stop only an estimated seventy percent of murders."

"I know that," Gelsen said, feeling extremely uncomfortable. "I believe there might be a moral danger in allowing a machine to make decisions that are rightfully man's," he declared doggedly.

"Oh, come now, Gelsen," one of the corporation presidents said. "It's nothing of the sort. The watchbird will only reinforce the decisions made by honest men from the beginning of time."

"I think that is true," the representative agreed. "But I can understand how Mr. Gelsen feels. It is sad that we must put a human problem into the hands of a machine, sadder still that we must have a machine enforce our laws. But I ask you to remember, Mr. Gelsen, that there is no other possible way of stopping a murderer *before he strikes*. It would be unfair to the many innocent people killed every year if we were to restrict watchbird on philosophical grounds. Don't you agree that I'm right?"

"Yes, I suppose I do," Gelsen said unhappily. He had told himself all that a thousand times, but something still bothered him. Perhaps he would talk it over with Macintyre.

As the conference broke up, a thought struck him. He grinned.

A lot of policemen were going to be out of work!

"Now what do you think of that?" Officer Celtrics demanded. "Fifteen years in Homicide and a machine is replacing me." He wiped a large red hand across his forehead and leaned against the captain's desk. "Ain't science marvelous?"

Two other policemen, late of Homicide, nodded glumly.

"Don't worry about it," the captain said. "We'll find a home for you in Larceny, Celtrics. You'll like it here."

"I just can't get over it," Celtrics complained. "A lousy little piece of tin and glass is going to solve all the crimes."

"Not quite," the captain said. "The watchbirds are supposed to prevent the crimes before they happen."

"Then how'll they be crimes?" one of the policeman asked. "I mean they can't hang you for murder until you commit one, can they?"

"That's not the idea," the captain said. "The watchbirds are supposed to stop a man before he commits a murder."

"Then no one arrests him?" Celtrics asked.

"I don't know how they're going to work that out," the captain admitted.

The men were silent for a while. The captain yawned and examined his watch.

"The thing I don't understand," Celtrics said, still leaning on the captain's desk, "is just how do they do it? How did it start, Captain?"

The captain studied Celtrics's face for possible irony; after all, watchbird had been in the papers for months. But then he remembered that Celtrics, like his sidekicks, rarely bothered to turn past the sports pages.

"Well," the captain said, trying to remember what he had read in the Sunday supplements, "these scientists were working on criminology. They were studying murderers, to find out what made them tick. So they found that murderers throw out a different sort of brain wave from ordinary people. And their glands act funny, too. All this happens when they're about to commit a murder. So these scientists worked out a special machine to flash red or something when these brain waves turned on."

"Scientists," Celtrics said bitterly.

"Well, after the scientists had this machine, they didn't know what to do with it. It was too big to move around, and murderers didn't drop in often enough to make it flash. So they built it into a smaller unit and tried it out in a few police stations. I think they tried one upstate. But it didn't work so good. You couldn't get to the crime in time. That's why they built the watchbirds."

"I don't think they'll stop no criminals," one of the policemen insisted.

"They sure will. I read the test results. They can smell him out before he commits a crime. And when they reach him, they give him a powerful shock or something. It'll stop him."

"You closing up Homicide, Captain?" Celtrics asked.

"Nope," the captain said. "I'm leaving a skeleton crew in until we see how these birds do."

"Hah," Celtrics said. "Skeleton crew. That's funny."

"Sure," the captain said. "Anyhow, I'm going to leave some men on. It seems the birds don't stop all murders."

"Why not?"

"Some murderers don't have these brain waves," the captain answered, trying to remember what the newspaper article had said. "Or their glands don't work or something."

"Which ones don't they stop?" Celtrics asked, with professional curiosity.

"I don't know. But I hear they got the damned things fixed so they're going to stop all of them soon."

"How they working that?"

"They learn. The watchbirds, I mean. Just like people."

"You kidding me?"

"Nope."

"Well," Celtrics said, "I think I'll just keep old Betsy oiled, just in case. You can't trust these scientists."

"Right."

"Birds!" Celtrics scoffed.

Over the town, the watchbird soared in a long, lazy curve. Its aluminum hide glistened in the morning sun, and dots of light danced on its stiff wings. Silently it flew.

Silently, but with all senses functioning. Built-in kinesthetics told the watchbird where it was, and held it in a long search curve. Its eyes and ears operated as one unit, searching, seeking.

And then something happened! The watchbird's electronically fast reflexes picked up the edge of

a sensation. A correlation center tested it, matching it with electrical and chemical data in its memory files. A relay tripped.

Down the watchbird spiraled, coming in on the increasingly strong sensation. It *smelled* the outpouring of certain glands, *tasted* a deviant brain wave.

Fully alerted and armed, it spun and banked in the bright morning sunlight.

Dinelli was so intent he didn't see the watchbird coming. He had his gun poised, and his eyes pleaded with the big grocer.

"Don't come no closer."

"You lousy little punk," the grocer said, and took another step forward. "Rob me? I'll break every bone in your puny body."

The grocer, too stupid or too courageous to understand the threat of the gun, advanced on the little thief.

"All right," Dinelli said, in a thorough state of panic. "All right, sucker, take—"

A bolt of electricity knocked him on his back. The gun went off, smashing a breakfast food display.

"What in hell?" the grocer asked, staring at the stunned thief. And then he saw a flash of silver wings. "Well, I'm really damned. Those watchbirds work!"

He stared until the wings disappeared in the sky. Then he telephoned the police.

The watchbird returned to his search curve. His thinking center correlated the new facts he had learned about murder. Several of these he hadn't known before.

This new information was simultaneously flashed to all the other watchbirds and their information was flashed back to him.

New information, methods, definitions were constantly passing between them.

Now that the watchbirds were rolling off the assembly line in a steady stream, Gelsen allowed himself to relax. A loud contented hum filled his plant. Orders were being filled on time, with top priorities given to the biggest cities in his area, and working down to the smallest towns.

"All smooth, Chief," Macintyre said, coming in the door. He had just completed a routine inspection.

"Fine. Have a seat."

The big engineer sat down and lighted a cigarette.

"We've been working on this for some time," Gelsen said, when he couldn't think of anything else.

"We sure have," Macintyre agreed. He leaned back and inhaled deeply. He had been one of the consulting engineers on the original watchbird. That was six years back. He had been working for Gelsen ever since, and the men had become good friends.

"The thing I wanted to ask you was this—" Gelsen paused. He couldn't think how to phrase what he wanted. Instead he asked. "What do you think of the watchbirds, Mac?"

"Who, me?" The engineer grinned nervously. He had been eating, drinking, and sleeping watchbird ever since its inception. He had never found it necessary to have an attitude. "Why, I think it's great."

"I don't mean that," Gelsen said. He realized that what he wanted was to have someone understand his point of view. "I mean do you figure there might be some danger in machine thinking?"

"I don't think so, Chief. Why do you ask?"

"Look, I'm no scientist or engineer. I've just handled cost and production and let you boys worry

about how. But as a layman, watchbird is starting to frighten me."

"No reason for that."

"I don't like the idea of the learning circuits."

"But why not?" Then Macintyre grinned again. "I know. You're like a lot of people, Chief—afraid your machines are going to wake up and say, 'What are we doing here? Let's go out and rule the world.' Is that it?"

"Maybe something like that," Gelsen admitted.

"No chance of it," Macintyre said. "The watchbirds are complex, I'll admit, but an MIT calculator is a whole lot more complex. And it hasn't got consciousness."

"No. But the watchbirds can *learn*."

"Sure. So can all the new calculators. Do you think they'll team up with the watchbirds?"

Gelsen felt annoyed at Macintyre, and even more annoyed at himself for being ridiculous. "It's a fact that the watchbirds can put their learning into action. No one is monitoring them."

"So that's the trouble," Macintyre said.

"I've been thinking of getting out of watchbird." Gelsen hadn't realized it until that moment.

"Look, Chief," Macintyre said. "Will you take an engineer's word on this?"

"Let's hear it."

"The watchbirds are no more dangerous than an automobile, an IBM calculator, or a thermometer. They have no more consciousness or volition than those things. The watchbirds are built to respond to certain stimuli, and to carry out certain operations when they receive that stimuli."

"And the learning circuits?"

"You have to have those," Macintyre said patiently, as though explaining the whole thing to a ten-year-old. "The purpose of the watchbird is to frustrate all murder attempts, right? Well, only certain murderers give out these stimuli. In order to stop all of them, the watchbird has to search out new definitions of murder and correlate them with what it already knows."

"I think it's inhuman," Gelsen said.

"That's the best thing about it. The watchbirds are unemotional. Their reasoning is nonanthropomorphic. You can't bribe them or drug them. You shouldn't fear them, either."

The intercom on Gelsen's desk buzzed. He ignored it.

"I know all this," Gelsen said. "But, still, sometimes I feel like the man who invented dynamite. He thought it would only be used for blowing up tree stumps."

"*You* didn't invent watchbird."

"I still feel morally responsible because I manufacture them."

The intercom buzzed again, and Gelsen irritably punched a button.

"The reports are in on the first week of watchbird operation," his secretary told him.

"How do they look?"

"Wonderful, sir."

"Send them in in fifteen minutes." Gelsen switched the intercom off and turned back to Macintyre, who was cleaning his fingernails with a wooden match. "Don't you think that this represents a trend in human thinking? The mechanical god? The electronic father?"

"Chief," Macintyre said, "I think you should study watchbird more closely. Do you know what's built into the circuits?"

"Only generally."

"First, there is a purpose. Which is to stop living organisms from committing murder. Two, murder may be defined as an act of violence, consisting of breaking, mangling, maltreating, or

otherwise stopping the functions of a living organism by a living organism. Three, most murders are detectable by certain chemical and electrical changes."

Macintyre paused to light another cigarette. "Those conditions take care of the routine functions. Then, for the learning circuits, there are two more conditions. Four, there are some living organisms who commit murder without the signs mentioned in three. Five, these can be detected by data applicable to condition two."

"I see," Gelsen said.

"You realize how foolproof it is?"

"I suppose so." Gelsen hesitated a moment. "I guess that's all."

"Right," the engineer said, and left.

Gelsen thought for a few moments. There *couldn't* be anything wrong with the watchbirds.

"Send in the reports," he said into the intercom.

High above the lighted buildings of the city, the watchbird soared. It was dark, but in the distance, the watchbird could see another, and another beyond that. For this was a large city.

To prevent murder ...

There was more to watch for now. New information had crossed the invisible network that connected all watchbirds. New data, new ways of detecting the violence of murder.

There! The edge of a sensation! Two watchbirds dipped simultaneously. One had received the scent a fraction of a second before the other. He continued down while the other resumed monitoring.

Condition four, there are some living organisms who commit murder without the signs mentioned in condition three.

Through his new information, the watchbird knew by extrapolation that this organism was bent on murder, even though the characteristic chemical and electrical smells were absent.

The watchbird, all senses acute, closed in on the organism.

He found what he wanted, and dived.

Roger Greco leaned against a building, his hands in his pockets. In his left hand was the cool butt of a .45. Greco waited patiently.

He wasn't thinking of anything in particular, just relaxing against a building, waiting for a man. Greco didn't know why the man was to be killed. He didn't care. Greco's lack of curiosity was part of his value. The other part was his skill.

One bullet, neatly placed in the head of a man he didn't know. It didn't excite him or sicken him. It was a job, just like anything else. You killed a man. So?

As Greco's victim stepped out of a building, Greco lifted the .45 out of his pocket. He released the safety and braced the gun with his right hand. He still wasn't thinking of anything as he took aim ...

And was knocked off his feet.

Greco thought he had been shot. He struggled up again, looking around, and sighted foggily on his victim.

Again he was knocked down.

This time he lay on the ground, trying to draw a bead. He never thought of stopping, for Greco was a craftsman.

With the next blow, everything went black. Permanently, because the watchbird's duty was to protect the object of violence—*at whatever cost to the murderer*.

The victim walked to his car. He hadn't noticed anything unusual. Everything had happened in silence.

Gelsen was feeling pretty good. The watchbirds had been operating perfectly. Crimes of violence had been cut in half, and cut again. Dark alleys were no longer mouths of horror. Parks and playgrounds were not places to shun after dusk.

Of course, there were still robberies. Petty thievery flourished, and embezzlement, larceny, forgery, and a hundred other crimes.

But that wasn't so important. You could regain lost money—never a lost life.

Gelsen was ready to admit that he had been wrong about the watchbirds. They *were* doing a job that humans had been unable to accomplish.

The first hint of something wrong came that morning.

Macintyre came into his office. He stood silently in front of Gelsen's desk, looking annoyed and a little embarrassed.

"What's the matter, Mac?" Gelsen asked.

"One of the watchbirds went to work on a slaughterhouse man. Knocked him out."

Gelsen thought about it for a moment. Yes, the watchbirds would do that. With their new learning circuits, they had probably defined the killing of animals as murder.

"Tell the packers to mechanize their slaughtering," Gelsen said. "I never liked that business myself."

"All right," Macintyre said. He pursed his lips, then shrugged his shoulders and left.

Gelsen stood beside his desk, thinking. Couldn't the watchbirds differentiate between a murderer and a man engaged in a legitimate profession? No, evidently not. To them, murder was murder. No exceptions. He frowned. That might take a little ironing out in the circuits.

But not too much, he decided hastily. Just make them a little more discriminating.

He sat down again and buried himself in paperwork, trying to avoid the edge of an old fear.

They strapped the prisoner into the chair and fitted the electrode to his leg.

"Oh, oh," he moaned, only half-conscious now of what they were doing.

They fitted the helmet over his shaved head and tightened the last straps. He continued to moan softly.

And then the watchbird swept in. How he had come, no one knew. Prisons are large and strong, with many locked doors, but the watchbird was there—

To stop a murder.

"Get that thing out of here!" the warden shouted, and reached for the switch. The watchbird knocked him down.

"Stop that!" a guard screamed, and grabbed for the switch himself. He was knocked to the floor beside the warden.

"This isn't murder, you idiot!" another guard said. He drew his gun to shoot down the glittering, wheeling metal bird.

Anticipating, the watchbird smashed him back against the wall.

There was silence in the room. After a while, the man in the helmet started to giggle. Then he stopped.

The watchbird stood on guard, fluttering in midair—

Making sure no murder was done.

New data flashed along the watchbird network. Unmonitored, independent, the thousands of watchbirds received and acted upon it.

The breaking, mangling, or otherwise stopping the functions of a living organism by a living

organism. New acts to stop.

"Damn you, git going!" Farmer Ollister shouted, and raised his whip again. The horse balked, and the wagon rattled and shook as he edged sideways.

"You lousy hunk of pigmeal, git going!" the farmer yelled, and he raised the whip again.

It never fell. An alert watchbird, sensing violence, had knocked him out of his seat.

A living organism? What is a living organism? The watchbirds extended their definitions as they became aware of more facts. And, of course, this gave them more work.

The deer was just visible at the edge of the woods. The hunter raised his rifle, and took careful aim.

He didn't have time to shoot.

With his free hand, Gelsen mopped perspiration from his face. "All right," he said into the telephone. He listened to the stream of vituperation from the other end, then placed the receiver gently in its cradle.

"What was that one?" Macintyre asked. He was unshaven, tie loose, shirt unbuttoned.

"Another fisherman," Gelsen said. "It seems the watchbirds won't let him fish even though his family is starving. What are we going to do about it, he wants to know."

"How many hundred is that?"

"I don't know. I haven't opened the mail."

"Well, I figured out where the trouble is," Macintyre said gloomily, with the air of a man who knows just how he blew up the Earth—after it was too late.

"Let's hear it."

"Everybody took it for granted that we wanted all murder stopped. We figured the watchbirds would think as we do. We ought to have qualified the conditions."

"I've got an idea," Gelsen said, "that we'd have to know just why and what murder is, before we could qualify the conditions properly. And if we knew that, we wouldn't need the watchbirds."

"Oh, I don't know about that. They just have to be told that some things which look like murder are not murder."

"But why should they stop fishermen?" Gelsen asked.

"Why shouldn't they? Fish and animals are living organisms. We just don't think that killing them is murder."

The telephone rang. Gelsen glared at it and punched the intercom. "I told you no more calls, no matter what."

"This is from Washington," his secretary said. "I thought you'd—"

"Sorry." Gelsen picked up the telephone. "Yes. Certainly is a mess ... Have they? All right, I certainly will." He put down the telephone.

"Short and sweet," he told Macintyre. "We're to shut down temporarily."

"That won't be so easy," Macintyre said. "The watchbirds operate independent of any central control, you know. They come back once a week for a repair checkup. We'll have to turn them off then, one by one."

"Well, let's get to it. Monroe over on the Coast has shut down about a quarter of his birds."

"I think I can dope out a restricting circuit," Macintyre said.

"Fine," Gelsen replied bitterly. "You make me very happy."

The watchbirds were learning rapidly, expanding and adding to their knowledge. Loosely defined abstractions were extended, acted upon, and re-extended.

To stop murder ...

Metal and electrons reason well, but not in a human fashion.

A living organism? *Any* living organism!

The watchbirds set themselves the task of protecting all living things.

The fly buzzed around the room, lighting on a tabletop, pausing a moment, then darting to a window sill.

The old man stalked it, a rolled newspaper in his hand.

Murderer!

The watchbirds swept down and saved the fly in the nick of time.

The old man writhed on the floor a minute and then was silent. He had been given only a mild shock, but it had been enough for his fluttery, cranky heart.

His victim had been saved, though, and this was the important thing. Save the victim and give the aggressor his just desserts.

Gelsen demanded angrily. "Why aren't they being turned off!"

The assistant control engineer gestured. In a corner of the repair room lay the senior control engineer. He was just regaining consciousness.

"He tried to turn one of them off," the assistant engineer said. Both his hands were knotted together. He was making a visible effort not to shake.

"That's ridiculous. They haven't got any sense of self-preservation."

"Then turn them off yourself. Besides, I don't think any more are going to come."

What could have happened? Gelsen began to piece it together. The watchbirds still hadn't decided on the limits of a living organism. When some of them were turned off in the Monroe plant, the rest must have correlated the data.

So they had been forced to assume that they were living organisms, as well.

No one had ever told them otherwise. Certainly they carried on most of the functions of living organisms.

Then the old fears hit him. Gelsen trembled and hurried out of the repair room. He wanted to find Macintyre in a hurry.

The nurse handed the surgeon the sponge.

"Scalpel."

She placed it in his hand. He started to make the first incision. And then he was aware of a disturbance.

"Who let that thing in?"

"I don't know," the nurse said, her voice muffled by the mask.

"Get it out of here."

The nurse waved her arms at the bright winged thing, but it fluttered over her head.

The surgeon proceeded with the incision—as long as he was able.

The watchbird drove him away and stood guard.

"Telephone the watchbird company!" the surgeon ordered. "Get them to turn the thing off."

The watchbird was preventing violence to a living organism.

The surgeon stood by helplessly while his patient died.

Fluttering high above the network of highways, the watchbird watched and waited. It had been constantly working for weeks now, without rest or repair. Rest and repair were impossible, because the watchbird couldn't allow itself—a living organism—to be murdered. And that was what happened when watchbirds returned to the factory.

There was a built-in order to return, after the lapse of a certain time period. But the watchbird had a stronger order to obey—preservation of life, including its own.

The definitions of murder were almost infinitely extended now, impossible to cope with. But the watchbird didn't consider that. It responded to its stimuli, whenever they came and whatever their source.

There was a new definition of living organism in its memory files. It had come as a result of the watchbird discovery that watchbirds were living organisms. And it had enormous ramifications.

The stimuli came! For the hundredth time that day, the bird wheeled and banked, dropping swiftly down to stop murder.

Jackson yawned and pulled his car to a shoulder of the road. He didn't notice the glittering dot in the sky. There was no reason for him to. Jackson wasn't contemplating murder, by any human definition.

This was a good spot for a nap, he decided. He had been driving for seven straight hours and his eyes were starting to fog. He reached out to turn off the ignition key—

And was knocked back against the side of the car.

"What in hell's wrong with you?" he asked indignantly. "All I want to do is—" He reached for the key again, and again he was smacked back.

Jackson knew better than to try a third time. He had been listening to the radio and he knew what the watchbirds did to stubborn violators.

"You mechanical jerk," he said to the waiting metal bird. "A car's not alive. I'm not trying to kill it."

But the watchbird only knew that a certain operation resulted in stopping an organism. The car was certainly a functioning organism. Wasn't it of metal, as were the watchbirds? Didn't it run?

Macintyre said, "Without repairs they'll run down." He shoved a pile of specification sheets out of his way.

"How soon?" Gelsen asked.

"Six months to a year. Say a year, barring accidents."

"A year," Gelsen said. "In the meantime, everything is stopping dead. Do you know the latest?"

"What?"

"The watchbirds have decided that the Earth is a living organism. They won't allow farmers to break ground for plowing. And, of course, everything else is a living organism—rabbits, beetles, flies, wolves, mosquitoes, lions, crocodiles, crows, and smaller forms of life such as bacteria."

"I know," Macintyre said.

"And you tell me they'll wear out in six months or a year. What happens *now*? What are we going to eat in six months?"

The engineer rubbed his chin. "We'll have to do something quick and fast. Ecological balance is gone to hell."

"Fast isn't the word. Instantaneously would be better." Gelsen lighted his thirty-fifth cigarette for the day. "At least I have the bitter satisfaction of saying, 'I told you so.' Although I'm just as responsible as the rest of the machine-worshiping fools."

Macintyre wasn't listening. He was thinking about watchbirds. "Like the rabbit plague in Australia."

"The death rate is mounting," Gelsen said. "Famine. Floods. Can't cut down trees. Doctors can't —what was that you said about Australia?"

"The rabbits," Macintyre repeated. "Hardly any left in Australia now."

"Why? How was it done?"

"Oh, found some kind of germ that attacked only rabbits. I think it was propagated by mosquitoes —"

"Work on that," Gelsen said. "You might have something. I want you to get on the telephone, ask for an emergency hookup with the engineers of the other companies. Hurry it up. Together you may be able to dope out something."

"Right," Macintyre said. He grabbed a handful of blank paper and hurried to the telephone.

"What did I tell you?" Officer Celtrics said. He grinned at the captain. "Didn't I tell you scientists were nuts?"

"I didn't say you were wrong, did I?" the captain asked.

"No, but you weren't *sure*."

"Well, I'm sure now. You'd better get going. There's plenty of work for you."

"I know." Celtrics drew his revolver from its holster, checked it and put it back. "Are all the boys back. Captain?"

"All?" the captain laughed humorlessly. "Homicide has increased by fifty percent. There's more murder now than there's ever been."

"Sure," Celtrics said. "The watchbirds are too busy guarding cars and slugging spiders." He started toward the door, then turned for a parting shot.

"Take my word, Captain. Machines are *stupid*."

The captain nodded.

Thousands of watchbirds, trying to stop countless millions of murders—a hopeless task. But the watchbirds didn't hope. Without consciousness, they experienced no sense of accomplishment, no fear of failure. Patiently they went about their jobs, obeying each stimulus as it came.

They couldn't be everywhere at the same time, but it wasn't necessary to be. People learned quickly what the watchbirds didn't like and refrained from doing it. It just wasn't safe. With their high speed and superfast senses, the watchbirds got around quickly.

And now they meant business. In their original directives there had been a provision made for killing a murderer, if all other means failed.

Why spare a murderer?

It backfired. The watchbirds extracted the fact that murder and crimes of violence had increased geometrically since they had begun operation. This was true, because their new definitions increased the possibilities of murder. But to the watchbirds, the rise showed that the first methods had failed.

Simple logic. If A doesn't work, try B. The watchbirds shocked to kill.

Slaughterhouses in Chicago stopped and cattle starved to death in their pens, because farmers in

the Midwest couldn't cut hay or harvest grain.

No one had told the watchbirds that all life depends on carefully balanced murders.

Starvation didn't concern the watchbirds, since it was an act of omission.

Their interest lay only in acts of commission.

Hunters sat home, glaring at the silver dots in the sky, longing to shoot them down. But for the most part, they didn't try. The watchbirds were quick to sense the murder intent and to punish it.

Fishing boats swung idle at their moorings in San Pedro and Gloucester. Fish were living organisms.

Farmers cursed and spat and died, trying to harvest the crop. Grain was alive and thus worthy of protection. Potatoes were as important to the watchbird as any other living organism. The death of a blade of grass was equal to the assassination of a president—

To the watchbirds.

And, of course, certain machines were living. This followed, since the watchbirds were machines and living.

God help you if you maltreated your radio. Turning it off meant killing it. Obviously—its voice was silenced, the red glow of its tubes faded, it grew cold.

The watchbirds tried to guard their other charges. Wolves were slaughtered, trying to kill rabbits. Rabbits were electrocuted, trying to eat vegetables. Creepers were burned out in the act of strangling trees.

A butterfly was executed, caught in the act of outraging a rose.

This control was spasmodic, because of the fewness of the watchbirds. A billion watchbirds couldn't have carried out the ambitious project set by the thousands.

The effect was of a murderous force, ten thousand bolts of irrational lightning raging around the country, striking a thousand times a day.

Lightning which anticipated your moves and punished your intentions.

"Gentlemen, *please*," the government representative begged. "We must hurry."

The seven manufacturers stopped talking.

"Before we begin this meeting formally," the president of Monroe said, "I want to say something. We do not feel ourselves responsible for this unhappy state of affairs. It was a government project; the government must accept the responsibility, both moral and financial."

Gelsen shrugged his shoulders. It was hard to believe that these men, just a few weeks ago, had been willing to accept the glory of saving the world. Now they wanted to shrug off the responsibility when the salvation went amiss.

"I'm positive that that need not concern us now," the representative assured him. "We must hurry. You engineers have done an excellent job. I am proud of the cooperation you have shown in this emergency. You are hereby empowered to put the outlined plan into action."

"Wait a minute," Gelsen said.

"There is no time."

"The plan's no good."

"Don't you think it will work?"

"Of course it will work. But I'm afraid the cure will be worse than the disease."

The manufacturers looked as though they would have enjoyed throttling Gelsen. He didn't hesitate.

"Haven't we learned yet?" he asked. "Don't you see that you can't cure human problems by

mechanization?"

"Mr. Gelsen," the president of Monroe said, "I would enjoy hearing you philosophize, but unfortunately, people are being killed. Crops are being ruined. There is famine in some sections of the country already. The watchbirds must be stopped at once!"

"Murder must be stopped, too. I remember all of us agreeing upon that. But this is not the way!"

"What would you suggest?" the representative asked.

Gelsen took a deep breath. What he was about to say took all the courage he had.

"Let the watchbirds run down by themselves," Gelsen suggested.

There was a near-riot. The government representative broke it up.

"Let's take our lesson," Gelsen urged, "admit that we were wrong trying to cure human problems by mechanical means. Start again. Use machines, yes, but not as judges and teachers and fathers."

"Ridiculous," the representative said coldly. "Mr. Gelsen, you are overwrought. I suggest you control yourself." He cleared his throat. "All of you are ordered by the president to carry out the plan you have submitted." He looked sharply at Gelsen. "Not to do so will be treason."

"I'll cooperate to the best of my ability," Gelsen said.

"Good. Those assembly lines must be rolling within the week."

Gelsen walked out of the room alone. Now he was confused again. Had he been right or was he just another visionary? Certainly, he hadn't explained himself with much clarity.

Did he know what he meant?

Gelsen cursed under his breath. He wondered why he couldn't ever be sure of anything. Weren't there any values he could hold on to?

He hurried to the airport and to his plant.

The watchbird was operating erratically now. Many of its delicate parts were out of line, worn by almost continuous operation. But gallantly it responded when the stimuli came.

A spider was attacking a fly. The watchbird swooped down to the rescue.

Simultaneously, it became aware of something overhead. The watchbird wheeled to meet it.

There was a sharp crackle and a power bolt whizzed by the watchbird's wing. Angrily, it spat a shock wave.

The attacker was heavily insulated. Again it spat at the watchbird. This time, a bolt smashed through a wing. The watchbird darted away, but the attacker went after it in a burst of speed, throwing out more crackling power.

The watchbird fell, but managed to send out its message. Urgent! A new menace to living organisms and this was the deadliest yet!

Other watchbirds around the country integrated the message. Their thinking centers searched for an answer.

"Well, Chief, they bagged fifty today," Macintyre said, coming into Gelsen's office.

"Fine," Gelsen said, not looking at the engineer.

"Not so fine." Macintyre sat down. "Lord, I'm tired! It was seventy-two yesterday."

"I know." On Gelsen's desk were several dozen lawsuits, which he was sending to the government with a prayer.

"They'll pick up again, though," Macintyre said confidently. "The Hawks are especially built to hunt down watchbirds. They're stronger, faster, and they've got better armor. We really rolled them

out in a hurry, huh?"

"We sure did."

"The watchbirds are pretty good, too," Macintyre had to admit. "They're learning to take cover. They're trying a lot of stunts. You know, each one that goes down tells the others something."

Gelsen didn't answer.

"But anything the watchbirds can do, the Hawks can do better," Macintyre said cheerfully. "The Hawks have special learning circuits for hunting. They're more flexible than the watchbirds. They learn faster."

Gelsen gloomily stood up, stretched, and walked to the window. The sky was blank. Looking out, he realized that his uncertainties were over. Right or wrong, he had made up his mind.

"Tell me," he said, still watching the sky, "what will the Hawks hunt after they get all the watchbirds?"

"Huh?" Macintyre said. "Why—"

"Just to be on the safe side, you'd better design something to hunt down the Hawks. Just in case, I mean."

"You think—"

"All I know is that the Hawks are self-controlled. So were the watchbirds. Remote control would have been too slow, the argument went on. The idea was to get the watchbirds and get them fast. That meant no restricting circuits."

"We can dope something out," Macintyre said uncertainly.

"You've got an aggressive machine up in the air now. A murder machine. Before that it was an anti-murder machine. Your next gadget will have to be even more self-sufficient, won't it?"

Macintyre didn't answer.

"I don't hold you responsible," Gelsen said. "It's me. It's everyone."

In the air outside was a swift-moving dot.

"That's what comes," said Gelsen, "of giving a machine the job that was our own responsibility."

Overhead, a Hawk was zeroing in on a watchbird. The armored murder machine had learned a lot in a few days. Its sole function was to kill. At present it was impelled toward a certain type of living organism, metallic like itself.

But the Hawk had just discovered that there were other types of living organisms, too—

Which had to be murdered.

THE ACCOUNTANT

MR. DEE was seated in the big armchair, his belt loosened, the evening papers strewn around his knees. Peacefully he smoked his pipe, and considered how wonderful the world was. Today he had sold two amulets and a philter; his wife was bustling around the kitchen, preparing a delicious meal; and his pipe was drawing well. With a sigh of contentment, Mr. Dee yawned and stretched.

Morton, his nine-year-old son, hurried across the living room, laden down with books.

"How'd school go today?" Mr. Dee called.

"O.K.," the boy said, slowing down, but still moving toward his room.

"What have you got there?" Mr. Dee asked, gesturing at his son's tall pile of books.

"Just some more accounting stuff," Morton said, not looking at his father. He hurried into his room.

Mr. Dee shook his head. Somewhere, the lad had picked up the notion that he wanted to be an accountant. An accountant! True, Morton was quick with figures; but he would have to forget this nonsense. Bigger things were in store for him.

The doorbell rang.

Mr. Dee tightened his belt, hastily stuffed in his shirt, and opened the front door. There stood Miss Greeb, his son's fourth-grade teacher.

"Come in, Miss Greeb," said Dee. "Can I offer you something?"

"I have no time," said Miss Greeb. She stood in the doorway, her arms akimbo. With her gray, tangled hair, her thin, long-nosed face and red runny eyes, she looked exactly like a witch. And this was as it should be, for Miss Greeb was a witch.

"I've come to speak to you about your son," she said.

At this moment Mrs. Dee hurried out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

"I hope he hasn't been naughty," Mrs. Dee said anxiously.

Miss Greeb sniffed ominously. "Today I gave the yearly tests. Your son failed miserably."

"Oh dear," Mrs. Dee said. "It's spring. Perhaps—"

"Spring has nothing to do with it," said Miss Greeb. "Last week I assigned the Greater Spells of Cordus, section one. You know how easy *they* are. He didn't learn a single one."

"Hm," said Mr. Dee succinctly.

"In Biology, he doesn't have the slightest notion which are the basic conjuring herbs. Not the slightest."

"This is unthinkable," said Mr. Dee.

Miss Greeb laughed sourly. "Moreover, he has forgotten all the Secret Alphabet which he learned in third grade. He has forgotten the Protective Formula, forgotten the names of the 99 lesser imps of the Third Circle, forgotten what little he knew of the Geography of Greater Hell. And what's more, he doesn't want to learn."

Mr. and Mrs. Dee looked at each other silently. This was very serious indeed. A certain amount of boyish inattentiveness was allowable; encouraged, even, for it showed spirit. But a child *had* to learn the basics, if he ever hoped to become a full-fledged wizard.

"I can tell you right here and now," said Miss Greeb, "if this were the old days, I'd flunk him without another thought. But there are so few of us left."

Mr. Dee nodded sadly. Witchcraft had been steadily declining over the centuries. The old families

died out, or were snatched by demoniac forces, or became scientists. And the fickle public showed no interest whatsoever in the charms and enchantments of ancient days.

Now, only a scattered handful possessed the Old Lore, guarding it, teaching it in places like Miss Greeb's private school for the children of wizards. It was a heritage, a sacred trust.

"It's this accounting nonsense," said Miss Greeb. "I don't know where he got the notion." She stared accusingly at Dee. "And I don't know why it wasn't nipped in the bud."

Mr. Dee felt his cheeks grow hot.

"But I do know this. As long as Morton has *that* on his mind, he can't give his attention to Thaumaturgy."

Mr. Dee looked away from the witch's red eyes. It was his fault. He should never have brought home that toy adding machine. And when he first saw Morton playing at double-entry bookkeeping, he should have burned the ledger.

But how could he know it would grow into an obsession?

Mrs. Dee smoothed out her apron and said, "Miss Greeb, you know you have our complete confidence. What would you suggest?"

"All I can do I have done," said Miss Greeb. "The only remaining thing is to call up Boarbas, the Demon of Children. And that, naturally, is up to you."

"Oh, I don't think it's that serious yet," Mr. Dee said quickly. "Calling up Boarbas is a serious measure."

"As I said, that's up to you," Miss Greeb said. "Call Boarbas or not, as you see fit. As things stand now, your son will never be a wizard." She turned and started to leave.

"Won't you stay for a cup of tea?" Mrs. Dee asked hastily.

"No, I must attend a Witch's Coven in Cincinnati," said Miss Greeb, and vanished in a puff of orange smoke.

Mr. Dee fanned the smoke with his hands and closed the door. "Phew," he said. "You'd think she'd use a perfumed brand."

"She's old-fashioned," Mrs. Dee murmured.

They stood beside the door in silence. Mr. Dee was just beginning to feel the shock. It was hard to believe that his son, his own flesh and blood, didn't want to carry on the family tradition. It couldn't be true!

"After dinner," Dee said, finally, "I'll have a man-to-man talk with him. I'm sure we won't need any demoniac intervention."

"Good," Mrs. Dee said. "I'm sure you can make the boy understand." She smiled, and Dee caught a glimpse of the old witch-light flickering behind her eyes.

"My roast!" Mrs. Dee gasped suddenly, the witch-light dying. She hurried back to her kitchen.

Dinner was a quiet meal. Morton knew that Miss Greeb had been there, and he ate in guilty silence, glancing occasionally at his father. Mr. Dee sliced and served the roast, frowning deeply. Mrs. Dee didn't even attempt any small talk.

After bolting his dessert, the boy hurried to his room.

"Now we'll see," Mr. Dee said to his wife. He finished the last of his coffee, wiped his mouth, and stood up. "I am going to reason with him now. Where is my Amulet of Persuasion?"

Mrs. Dee thought deeply for a moment. Then she walked across the room to the bookcase. "Here it is," she said, lifting it from the pages of a brightly jacketed novel. "I was using it as a marker."

Mr. Dee slipped the amulet into his pocket, took a deep breath, and entered his son's room.

Morton was seated at his desk. In front of him was a notebook, scribbled with figures and tiny,

precise notations. On his desk were six carefully sharpened pencils, a soap eraser, an abacus, and a toy adding machine. His books hung precariously over the edge of the desk; there was *Money*, by Rimraamer, *Bank Accounting Practice*, by Johnson and Calhoun, *Ellman's Studies for the CPA*, and a dozen others.

Mr. Dee pushed aside a mound of clothes and made room for himself on the bed. "How's it going, son?" he asked, in his kindest voice.

"Fine, Dad," Morton answered eagerly. "I'm up to chapter four in *Basic Accounting*, and I answered all the questions—"

"Son," Dee broke in, speaking very softly, "how about your regular homework?"

Morton looked uncomfortable and scuffed his feet on the floor.

"You know, not many boys have a chance to become wizards in this day and age."

"Yes, sir, I know," Morton looked away abruptly. In a high. nervous voice he said, "But Dad, I want to be an accountant. I really do, Dad."

Mr. Dee shook his head. "Morton, there's always been a wizard in our family. For eighteen hundred years, the Dees have been famous in supernatural circles."

Morton continued to look out the window and scuff his feet.

"You wouldn't want to disappoint me, would you, son?" Dee smiled sadly. "You know, anyone can be an *accountant*. But only a chosen few can master the Black Arts."

Morton turned away from the window. He picked up a pencil, inspected the point, and began to turn it slowly in his fingers.

"How about it, boy? Won't you work harder for Miss Greeb?"

Morton shook his head. "I want to be an accountant."

Mr. Dee contained his sudden rush of anger with difficulty. What was wrong with the Amulet of Persuasion? Could the spell have run down? He should have recharged it. Nevertheless, he went on.

"Morton," he said in a husky voice, "I'm only a Third Degree Adept, you know. My parents were very poor. They couldn't send me to The University."

"I know," the boy said in a whisper.

"I want you to have all the things I never had. Morton, you can be a First Degree Adept." He shook his head wistfully. "It'll be difficult. But your mother and I have a little put away, and we'll scrape the rest together somehow."

Morton was biting his lip and turning the pencil rapidly in his fingers.

"How about it, son? You know, as a First Degree Adept, you won't have to work in a store. You can be a Direct Agent of The Black One. A Direct Agent! What do you say, boy?"

For a moment, Dee thought his son was moved. Morton's lips were parted, and there was a suspicious brightness in his eyes. But then the boy glanced at his accounting books, his little abacus, his toy adding machine.

"I'm going to be an accountant," he said.

"We'll see!" Mr. Dee shouted, all patience gone. "You will *not* be an accountant, young man. You will be a wizard. It was good enough for the rest of your family, and by all that's damnable, it'll be good enough for you. You haven't heard the last of this, young man." And he stormed out of the room.

Immediately, Morton returned to his accounting books.

Mr. and Mrs. Dee sat together on the couch, not talking. Mrs. Dee was busily knitting a wind-cord, but her mind wasn't on it. Mr. Dee stared moodily at a worn spot on the living room rug.

Finally, Dee said, "I've spoiled him. Boarbas is the only solution."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Dee said hastily. "He's so young."

"Do you want your son to be an accountant?" Mr. Dee asked bitterly. "Do you want him to grow up scribbling with figures instead of doing The Black One's important work?"

"Of course not," said Mrs. Dee. "But Boarbas—"

"I know. I feel like a murderer already."

They thought for a few moments. Then Mrs. Dee said, "Perhaps his grandfather can do something. He was always fond of the boy."

"Perhaps he can," Mr. Dee said thoughtfully. "But I don't know if we should disturb him. After all, the old gentleman has been dead for three years."

"I know," Mrs. Dee said, undoing an incorrect knot in the wind-cord. "But it's either that or Boarbas."

Mr. Dee agreed. Unsettling as it would be to Morton's grandfather, Boarbas was infinitely worse. Immediately, Dee made preparations for calling up his dead father.

He gathered together the henbane, the ground unicorn's horn, and the hemlock, together with a morsel of dragon's tooth. These he placed on the rug.

"Where's my wand?" he asked his wife.

"I put it in the bag with your golfsticks," she told him.

Mr. Dee got his wand and waved it over the ingredients. He muttered the three words of The Unbinding, and called out his father's name.

Immediately a wisp of smoke arose from the rug.

"Hello, Grandpa Dee," Mrs. Dee said.

"Dad, I'm sorry to disturb you," Mr. Dee said. "But my son—your grandson—refuses to become a wizard. He wants to be an—accountant."

The wisp of smoke trembled, then straightened out and described a character of the Old Language.

"Yes," Mr. Dee said. "We tried persuasion. The boy is adamant."

Again the smoke trembled, and formed another character.

"I suppose that's best," Mr. Dee said. "If you frighten him out of his wits once and for all, he'll forget this accounting nonsense. It's cruel—but it's better than Boarbas."

The wisp of smoke nodded, and streamed toward the boy's room. Mr. and Mrs. Dee sat down on the couch.

The door of Morton's room was slammed open, as though by a gigantic wind. Morton looked up, frowned, and returned to his books.

The wisp of smoke turned into a winged lion with the tail of a shark. It roared hideously, crouched, snarled, and gathered itself for a spring.

Morton glanced at it, raised both eyebrows, and proceeded to jot down a column of figures.

The lion changed into a three-headed lizard, its flanks reeking horribly of blood. Breathing gusts of fire, the lizard advanced on the boy.

Morton finished adding the column of figures, checked the result on his abacus, and looked at the lizard.

With a screech, the lizard changed into a giant bat. It fluttered around the boy's head, moaning and gibbering.

Morton grinned, and turned back to his books.

Mr. Dee was unable to stand it any longer. "Damn it," he shouted, "aren't you scared?"

"Why should I be?" Morton asked. "It's only grandpa."

Upon the word, the bat dissolved into a plume of smoke. It nodded sadly to Mr. Dee, bowed to Mrs. Dee, and vanished.

"Good-bye, Granpa," Morton called. He got up and closed his door.

"That does it," Mr. Dee said. "The boy is too cocksure of himself. We must call up Boarbas."

"No!" his wife said.

"What, then?"

"I just don't know anymore," Mrs. Dee said, on the verge of tears. "You *know* what Boarbas does to children. They're never the same afterwards."

Mr. Dee's face was hard as granite. "I know. It can't be helped."

"He's so young!" Mrs. Dee wailed. "It—it will be traumatic!"

"If so, we will use all the resources of modern psychology to heal him," Mr. Dee said soothingly. "He will have the best psychoanalysts money can buy. But the boy must be a wizard!"

"Go ahead then," Mrs. Dee said, crying openly. "But please don't ask me to assist you."

How like a woman, Dee thought. Always turning into jelly at the moment when firmness was indicated. With a heavy heart, he made the preparations for calling up Boarbas, Demon of Children.

First came the intricate sketching of the pentagon, the twelve-pointed star within it, and the endless spiral within that. Then came the herbs and essences; expensive items, but absolutely necessary for the conjuring. Then came the inscribing of the Protective Spell, so that Boarbas might not break loose and destroy them all. Then came the three drops of hippogriff blood—

"Where is my hippogriff blood?" Mr. Dee asked, rummaging through the living room cabinet.

"In the kitchen, in the aspirin bottle," Mrs. Dee said, wiping her eyes.

Dee found it, and then all was in readiness. He lighted the black candles and chanted the Unlocking Spell.

The room was suddenly very warm, and there remained only the Naming of the Name.

"Morton," Mr. Dee called. "Come here."

Morton opened the door and stepped out, holding one of his accounting books tightly, looking very young and defenseless.

"Morton, I am about to call up the Demon of Children. Don't make me do it, Morton."

The boy turned pale and shrank back against the door. But stubbornly he shook his head.

"Very well," Mr. Dee said. "BOARBAS!"

There was an ear-splitting clap of thunder and a wave of heat, and Boarbas appeared, as tall as the ceiling, chuckling evilly.

"Ah!" cried Boarbas, in a voice that shook the room. "A little boy."

Morton gaped, his jaw open and eyes bulging.

"A naughty little boy," Boarbas said, and laughed. The demon marched forward, shaking the house with every stride.

"Send him away!" Mrs. Dee cried.

"I can't," Dee said, his voice breaking. "I can't do anything until he's finished."

The demon's great horned hands reached for Morton; but quickly the boy opened the accounting book. "Save me!" he screamed.

In that instant, a tall, terribly thin old man appeared, covered with worn pen points and ledger sheets, his eyes two empty zeroes.

"*Zico Pico Reel!*" chanted Boarbas, turning to grapple with the newcomer. But the thin old man laughed, and said, "A contract of a corporation which is *ultra vires* is not voidable only, but utterly void."

At these words, Boarbas was flung back, breaking a chair as he fell. He scrambled to his feet, his

skin glowing red-hot with rage, and intoned the Demoniac Master-Spell: "VRAT, HAT, HO!"

But the thin old man shielded Morton with his body, and cried the words of Dissolution. "Expiration, Repeal, Occurrence, Surrender, Abandonment, and Death!"

Boarbas squeaked in agony. Hastily he backed away, fumbling in the air until he found The Opening. He jumped through this, and was gone.

The tall, thin old man turned to Mr. and Mrs. Dee, cowering in a corner of the living room, and said, "Know that I am The Accountant. And Know, Moreover, that this Child has signed a Compact with Me, to enter My Apprenticeship and be My Servant. And in return for Services Rendered, I, THE ACCOUNTANT, am teaching him the Damnation of Souls, by means of ensaring them in a cursed web of Figures, Forms, Torts, and Reprisals. And behold, this is My Mark upon him!"

The Accountant held up Morton's right hand, and showed the ink smudge on the third finger.

He turned to Morton, and in a softer voice said, "Tomorrow, lad, we will consider some aspects of Income Tax Evasion as a Path to Damnation."

"Yes, *sir*," Morton said eagerly.

And with another sharp look at the Dees, The Accountant vanished.

For long seconds there was silence. Then Dee turned to his wife.

"Well," Dee said, "if the boy wants to be an accountant *that* badly, I'm sure I'm not going to stand in his way."

PARADISE II

THE SPACE station revolved around its planet, waiting. Properly speaking it was without intelligence, for intelligence was unnecessary. It had awareness, however, and certain tropisms, affinities, reactions.

It was resourceful. Its purpose was stamped into the very metal, impressed into the circuits and tubes. And perhaps the machine retained some of the emotions that had gone into its building—the wild hopes, the fears, the frenzied race against time.

But the hopes had been in vain, for the race was lost, and the great machine hung in space, incomplete and useless.

But it had awareness, and certain tropisms, affinities, reactions. It was resourceful. It knew what it needed. So it scanned space, waiting for its missing components.

In the region of Bootes he came to a little cherry-red sun, and as the ship swung in, he saw that one of its planets was the rare, beautiful blue-green color of Earth.

"Look at this!" Fleming shouted, turning from the controls, his voice breaking with excitement. "Earth type. It *is* Earth type, isn't it, Howard? We'll make a fortune on this one!"

Howard came forward slowly from the ship's galley, munching on a piece of avocado. He was short and bald, and he carried a dignified paunch the size of a small watermelon. He was irritated, for he had been deeply involved in making dinner. Cooking was an art with Howard, and had he not been a businessman, he would have been a chef. They ate well on all their trips, because Howard had a way with fried chicken, served his roasts with Howard sauce, and was especially adept at Howard salad.

"It might be Earth type," he said, staring coldly at the blue-green planet.

"Of course it is," Fleming said. Fleming was young, and more enthusiastic than any man had a right to be in space. He was gaunt, in spite of Howard's cooking, and his carroty hair fell messily over his forehead. Howard tolerated him, not only because Fleming had a way with ships and engines; above all, Fleming had a businesslike attitude. A businesslike attitude was most necessary in space, where it cost a small fortune just to raise ship.

"If only it's not populated," Fleming was praying in his enthusiastic, businesslike way. "If only it's all ours. *Ours*, Howard! An Earthtype planet! God, we can sell the real estate alone for a fortune, to say nothing of mineral rights, refueling rights, and everything else."

Howard swallowed the last of his avocado. Young Fleming still had a lot to learn. Finding and selling planets was a business, exactly like growing and selling oranges. There was a difference, of course; oranges aren't dangerous, and planets sometimes are. But then, oranges don't make the profits a good planet can.

"Shall we land on our planet now?" Fleming asked eagerly.

"By all means," Howard said. "Only—that space station ahead leads me to believe that the inhabitants might consider it *their* planet."

Fleming looked. Sure enough, a space station, previously hidden by the planet's bulk, was swinging into sight.

"Oh, damn," Fleming said, his narrow freckled face twisting into a pout. "It's populated, then. Do you suppose we could—" He left the sentence unfinished, but glanced at the gunfire controls.

"Hmm." Howard looked at the space station, appraised the technology that had built it, then

glanced at the planet. Regretfully he shook his head. "No, not here."

"Oh, well," Fleming said. "At least we have first trading rights." He looked out the port again and caught Howard's arm. "Look—the space station."

Across the gray metal surface of the sphere bright lights were winking in sequence.

"What do you suppose it means?" Fleming asked.

"I have no idea," Howard told him, "and we'll never find out here. You may as well land on the planet, if no one tries to stop you."

Fleming nodded, and switched the controls to manual. For a few moments, Howard watched.

The control board was covered with dials, switches, and gauges, which were made of metal, plastics, and quartz. Fleming, on the other hand, was flesh and blood and bone. It seemed impossible that any relationship could exist between them, except the most perfunctory. Instead, Fleming seemed to merge into the control board. His eyes scanned the dials with mechanical precision, his fingers became extensions of the switches. The metal seemed to become pliable under his hands, and amenable to his will. The quartz gauges gleamed red, and Fleming's eyes shone red, too, with a glow that didn't seem entirely reflection.

Once the deceleration spiral had been entered, Howard settled himself comfortably in the galley. He estimated his fuel and food expenditures, plus depreciation on the ship. To the sum he added a safe third, and marked it down in a ledger. It would come in useful later, for his income tax.

They landed on the outskirts of a city, and waited for the local customs officials. No one came. They ran the standard atmosphere and microorganism tests, and continued waiting. Still no one came. After half a day, Fleming undogged the hatch, and they started toward the city.

The first skeletons, scattered across the bomb-torn concrete road, puzzled them; it seemed so untidy. What civilized people left skeletons in their roads? Why didn't someone clean up?

The city was populated only by skeletons, thousands, millions, packed into crumbling theaters, fallen at the doorways of dusty stores, scattered across the bullet-ripped streets.

"Must have had a war on," Fleming said brightly.

In the center of the city they found a parade grounds where rank upon rank of uniformed skeletons lay upon the grass. The reviewing stands were packed with skeleton officials, skeleton officers, skeleton wives and parents. And behind the stands were skeleton children, gathered to see the fun.

"A war, all right," Fleming said, nodding his head with finality. "They lost."

"Obviously," Howard said. "But who won?"

"What?"

"Where are the victors?"

At that moment the space station passed overhead, casting a shadow across the silent ranks of skeletons. Both men glanced up uneasily.

"You think everyone's dead?" Fleming asked hopefully.

"I think we should find out."

They walked back to the ship. Fleming began to whistle out of sheer high spirits, and kicked a mound of pocked bones out of his way. "We've struck it rich," he said, grinning at Howard.

"Not yet," Howard said cautiously. "There may be survivors—" He caught Fleming's look and smiled in spite of himself.

"It *does* look like a successful business trip."

Their tour of the planet was brief. The blue-green world was a bomb-splattered tomb. On every continent, the towns contained their tens of thousands of bony inhabitants, each city its millions. The

plains and mountains were scattered with skeletons, and there were skeletons in the lakes, and skeletons in the forests and jungles.

"What a mess!" Fleming said at last, as they hovered over the planet. "What do you suppose the population was here?"

"I'd estimate it at nine billion, give or take a billion," Howard said.

"What do you suppose happened?"

Howard smiled sagely. "There are three classic methods of genocide. The first is pollution of the atmosphere by poison gas. Allied to that is radioactive poisoning, which kills the plant life as well. And finally, there are mutated laboratory germs, created solely for the purpose of attacking whole populations. If they get out of hand, they can wipe out a planet."

"Think that happened here?" Fleming asked, with lively interest.

"I believe so," Howard said, wiping an apple on his arm and biting into it. "I'm no pathologist, but the marks on those bones—"

"Germs," Fleming said. he coughed involuntarily. "You don't suppose—"

"You'd be dead already, if they were still active. All this must have happened several hundred years ago, to judge by the weathering of the skeletons. The germs die for lack of a human host."

Fleming nodded emphatically. "That's made to order. Oh, it's too bad about the people. Fortunes of war and all that. But this planet really is ours!" He peered out the port at the rich green fields below. "What'll we call it, Howard?"

Howard looked at the fields, and the wild, overgrown pastureland that bordered the concrete roads. "We might call it Paradise II," he said. "This place ought to be a farmer's heaven."

"Paradise II! That's pretty good," Fleming said. "I suppose we'll have to hire a gang to clear off those skeletons. Looks too weird-like."

Howard nodded. There were many details to be attended to. "We'll do that after—"

The space station passed over them.

"The lights!" Howard cried suddenly.

"Lights?" Fleming stared at the receding sphere.

"When we came in. Remember? Those flashing lights?"

"Right." Fleming said. "Do you suppose someone is holed up in the station?"

"We'll find out right now," Howard said grimly. He took a determined bite of his apple as Fleming turned the ship.

When they reached the space station the first thing they saw was the other ship, clinging to the station's polished metal as a spider clings to its web. It was small, a third the size of their ship, and one of its hatches was ajar.

The two men, suited and helmeted, paused in front of the hatch. Fleming seized the hatch in his gloved hands, and pulled it completely open. Cautiously they aimed their flash-lights inside, looked, and jerked abruptly back. Then Howard motioned impatiently, and Fleming started in.

There was the body of a man inside, half out of the pilot's chair, frozen forever in that unstable position. His face was fleshed enough to show his death agony, but the skin had been eaten bone deep in spots by some disease.

Piled high in the rear of the ship were dozens of wooden cases. Fleming broke one open and flashed his light inside.

"Food," Howard said.

"Must have tried to hide in the space station," Fleming said.

"Looks that way. He never made it." They left the ship quickly, a little disgusted. Skeletons were

acceptable; they were self-contained entities in themselves. But this corpse was too eloquently dead.

"So who turned on the lights?" Fleming asked, on the surface of the station.

"Perhaps they were on automatic relay," Howard said doubtfully. "There couldn't be any survivors."

They walked across the surface of the station, and found the entrance.

"Shall we?" asked Fleming.

"Why bother?" Howard said quickly. "The race is dead. We might as well go back and file our claim."

"If there's even one survivor in there," Fleming reminded him, "the planet's his by law."

Howard nodded unwillingly. It would be too bad to make the long, expensive trip back to Earth, return with their surveying teams, and find someone cozily keeping house in the space station. It would be different if survivors were hiding on the planet. Legally, they would still have a valid claim. But a man in the space station, which they had neglected to examine—

"I suppose we must," Howard said, and opened the hatch.

Within, they were in total darkness. Howard turned his flashlight on Fleming. In its yellow glow, Fleming's face was completely shadowless, stylized like a primitive mask. Howard blinked, a little frightened at what he saw, for at that moment, Fleming's face was completely depersonalized.

"Air's breathable," Fleming said, and immediately regained his personality.

Howard pushed back his helmet and turned up the light. The sheer mass of the walls seemed to crush in on him. He groped in his pocket, found a radish, and popped it in his mouth for morale.

They started forward.

For half an hour they walked along a narrow, winding corridor, their flashlights pushing the darkness ahead of them. The metal floor, which had seemed so stable, began to creak and groan from hidden stresses, setting Howard's nerves on edge. Fleming seemed unaffected.

"This place must have been a bombing station," he remarked after a while.

"I suppose so."

"Simply tons of metal here," Fleming said conversationally, tapping one of the walls. "I suppose we'll have to sell it for junk, unless we can salvage some of the machinery."

"The price of scrap metal—" Howard began. But at that instant a section of floor opened directly under Fleming's feet. Fleming plunged out of sight so quickly that he didn't have a chance to scream, and the section of floor slammed back into place.

Howard staggered back, as though physically struck. His flashlight seemed to blaze maniacally for a moment, then fade. Howard stood perfectly still, his hands raised, his mind caught in the timelessness of shock.

The shock wave receded slowly, leaving Howard with a dull, pounding headache. "—is not particularly good just now," he said inanely, finishing his sentence, wishing that nothing had happened.

He stepped close to the section of floor and called, "Fleming."

There was no answer. A shudder passed over his body. He shouted, "Fleming!" at the top of his lungs, leaning over the sealed floor. He straightened up, his head pounding painfully, took a deep breath, turned, and trotted back to the entrance. He did not allow himself to think.

The entrance, however, was sealed, and its fused edges were still hot. Howard examined it with every appearance of interest. He touched it, tapped it, kicked it. Then he became aware of the darkness pressing against him. He whirled, perspiration pouring down his face.

"Who's there?" he shouted down the corridor. "Fleming! Can you hear me?"

There was no answer.

He shouted, "Who did this? Why did you flash the station lights? What did you do to Fleming?" He listened for a moment, then went on, sobbing for breath. "Unseal the entrance! I'll go, and I won't tell anyone!"

He waited, shining his light down the corridor, wondering what lay behind the darkness. Finally he screamed, "Why don't you open a trapdoor under *me?*"

He lay back against the wall, panting. No trapdoor opened. Perhaps, he thought, no trapdoor will. The thought gave him a moment's courage. Sternly he told himself that there had to be another way out. He walked back up the corridor.

An hour later he was still walking, his flashlight stabbing ahead, and darkness creeping at his back. He had himself under control now, and his headache had subsided to a dull ache. He had begun to reason again.

The lights could have been on automatic circuit. Perhaps the trapdoor had been automatic, too. As for the self-sealing entrance—that could be a precaution in time of war, to make sure that no enemy agent could sneak in.

He knew that his reasoning wasn't too sound, but it was the best he could do. The entire situation was inexplicable. That corpse in the spaceship, the beautiful dead planet—there was a relationship, somewhere. If only he could discover where.

"Howard," a voice said.

Howard jumped back convulsively, as though he had touched a high-tension wire. Immediately his headache resumed.

"It's me," the voice said. "Fleming."

Howard flashed his light wildly in all directions. "Where? Where are you?"

"About two hundred feet down, as well as I can judge," Fleming said, his voice floating harshly down the corridor. "The audio hookup isn't very good, but it's the best I can do."

Howard sat down in the corridor, because his legs refused to hold him up. He was relieved, however. There was something sane about Fleming being two hundred feet down, something very human and understandable about an imperfect audio hookup.

"Can you get up? How can I help you?"

"You can't," Fleming said, and there was a crackle of static which Howard thought was a chuckle. "I don't seem to have much ... body left."

"But where *is* your body?" Howard insisted seriously.

"Gone, smashed in the fall. There's just enough left of me to hook into circuit."

"I see," said Howard, feeling strangely light-headed. "You're now just a brain, a pure intelligence."

"Oh, there's a little more to me than that," Fleming said. "As much as the machine needs."

Howard started to giggle nervously, for he had an image of Fleming's gray brain swimming in a pool of crystal water. He stopped himself, and said, "The machine? What machine?"

"The space station. I imagine it's the most intricate machine ever built. It flashed the lights and opened the door."

"But why?"

"I expect to find out," Fleming said. "I'm a part of it now. Or perhaps it's a part of me. Anyhow, it needed me, because it's not really intelligent. I supply that."

"You? But the machine couldn't know you were coming!"

"I don't mean me, specifically. The man outside, in the ship, he was probably the real operator.

But I'll do. We'll finish the builder's plans."

Howard calmed himself with an effort. He couldn't think any more right now. His only concern was to get out of the station, back to his ship. To do this, he had Fleming to work with; but a new, unpredictable Fleming. He sounded human enough—but was he?"

"Fleming," Howard said tentatively.

"Yes, old man?"

That was encouraging. "Can you get me out of here?"

"I think so," Fleming's voice said. "I'll try."

"I'll come back with neurosurgeons," Howard assured him. "You'll be all right."

"Don't worry about me," Fleming said. "I'm all right now."

Howard lost count of the hours he walked. One narrow corridor followed another, and dissolved into still more corridors. He grew tired, and his legs began to stiffen. As he walked, he ate. There were sandwiches in his knapsack, and he munched on them mechanically, for strength.

"Fleming," he called finally, stopping to rest.

After a long pause he heard a barely recognizable sound, like metal grating against metal.

"How much longer?"

"Not much longer," the grating, metallic voice said. "Tired?"

"Yes."

"I will do what I can."

Fleming's voice was frightening, but silence was even more frightening. As Howard listened, he heard an engine, deep in the heart of the station, spurt into life.

"Fleming?"

"Yes?"

"What is all this? Is it a bomb station?"

"No. I do not know the purpose of the machine yet. I am still not entirely integrated."

"But it does have a purpose?"

"Yes!" The metallic voice grated so loud that Howard winced. "I possess a beautifully functional interlocking apparatus. In temperature control alone I am capable of a range of hundreds of degrees in a microsecond, to say nothing of my chemical mixing stores, power sources, and all the rest. And, of course, my purpose."

Howard didn't like the answer. It sounded as though Fleming were identifying with the machine, merging his personality with that of the space station. He forced himself to ask. "Why don't you know what it's for yet?"

"A vital component is missing," Fleming said, after a pause. "An indispensable matrix. Besides, I do not have full control yet."

More engines began to throb into life, and the walls vibrated with the sound. Howard could feel the floor tremble under him. The station seemed to be waking up, stretching, gathering its wits. He felt as though he were in the stomach of some giant sea monster.

Howard walked for several more hours, and he left behind him a trail of apple cores, orange peels, fatty bits of meat, an empty canteen, and a piece of waxed paper. He was eating constantly now, compulsively, and his hunger was dull and constant. While he ate he felt safe, for eating belonged with the spaceship, and Earth.

A section of wall slid back suddenly. Howard moved away from it.

"Go in," a voice, which he tentatively identified as Fleming's said.

"Why? What is it?" He turned his flashlight into the hole, and saw a continuous moving strip of floor disappearing into the darkness.

"You are tired," the voice like Fleming's said. "This way is faster."

Howard wanted to run, but there was no place to go. He had to trust Fleming, or brave the darkness on either side of his flashlight.

"Go in."

Obediently Howard climbed in, and sat down on the moving track. Ahead, all he could see was darkness. He lay back.

"Do you know what the station is for yet?" he asked the darkness.

"Soon," a voice answered. "We will not fail them."

Howard didn't dare ask who it was Fleming wouldn't fail. He closed his eyes and let the darkness close around him.

The ride continued for a long time. Howard's flashlight was clamped under his arm, and its beam went straight up, reflecting against the polished metal ceiling. He munched automatically on a piece of biscuit, not tasting it, hardly aware that it was in his mouth.

Around him, the machine seemed to be talking, and it was a language he didn't understand. He heard the labored creak of moving parts, protesting as they rubbed against each other. Then there came the liquid squirt of oil, and the pacified parts moved silently, perfectly. Engines squeaked and protested. They hesitated, coughing, then hummed pleasantly into life, And continually, through the other sounds, came the click-clack of circuits, changing, rearranging themselves, adjusting.

But what did it mean? Lying back, his eyes closed, Howard did not know. His only touch with reality was the biscuit he had been chewing, and soon that was gone, and only a nightmare was left in its place.

He saw the skeletons, marching across the planet, all the billions in sober lines, moving through the deserted cities, across the fat black fields, and out into space. They paraded past the dead pilot in his little spaceship, and the corpse stared at them enviously. Let me join you now, he asked, but the skeletons shook their heads pityingly, for the pilot is still burdened with flesh. When will the flesh slough away, when will he be free of its burden, asked the corpse, but the skeletons only shook their heads. When? When the machine is ready, its purpose learned. Then the skeleton billions will be redeemed, and the corpse freed of his flesh. Through his ruined lips the corpse pleads to be taken now. But the skeletons perceive only his flesh, and his flesh cannot abandon the food piled high in the ship. Sadly they march on, and the pilot waits within the ship, waiting for his flesh to melt away.

"Yes!"

Howard awakened with a start, and looked around. No skeletons, no corpse. Only the walls of the machine, close around him. He dug into his pockets, but all the food was gone. His fingers scratched up some crumbs, and he put them on his tongue.

"Yes!"

He *had* heard a voice! "What is it?" he asked.

"I know," the voice said triumphantly.

"Know? Know what?"

"My purpose!"

Howard jumped to his feet, flashing his light around. The sound of the metallic voice echoed around him, and he was filled with a nameless dread. It seemed horrible, suddenly, that the machine

should know its purpose.

"What is your purpose?" he asked, very softly.

In answer, a brilliant light flashed on, drowning out the feeble beam of his flashlight. Howard shut his eyes and stepped backwards, almost falling.

The strip was motionless. Howard opened his eyes and found himself in a great brilliantly lighted room. Looking around, he saw that it was completely paneled with mirrors.

A hundred Howards looked at him, and he stared back. Then he whirled around.

There was no exit. But the mirrored Howards did not whirl with him. They stood silently.

Howard lifted his right hand. The other Howards kept theirs at their sides. There were no mirrors.

The hundred Howards began to walk forward, toward the center of the room. They were unsteady on their feet, and no intelligence showed in their dull eyes. The original Howard gasped, and threw his flashlight at them. It clattered along the floor.

Instantaneously, a complete thought formed in his mind. This was the machine's purpose. Its builders had foreseen the death of their species. So they constructed the machine in space. Its purpose —to create humans, to populate the planet. It needed an operator, of course, and the real operator never reached it. And it needed a matrix ...

But these prototype Howards were obviously without intelligence. They milled around the room, moving automatically, barely able to control their limbs. And the original Howard discovered, almost as soon as the thought was born, that he was terribly wrong.

The ceiling opened up. Giant hooks descended, knives glistening with steam slid down. The walls opened, showing gigantic wheels and gears, blazing furnaces, frosty white surfaces. More and more Howards marched into the room, and the great knives and hooks cut into them, dragging Howard's brothers toward the open walls.

Not one of them screamed except the original Howard.

"Fleming!" he shrieked. "Not *me*. Not *me*. Fleming!"

Now it all added up; the space station, built at a time when war was decimating the planet. The operator, who had reached the machine only to die before he could enter. And his cargo of food ... which, as operator, he would never have eaten.

Of course! The population of the planet had been nine or ten billion! Starvation must have driven them to this final war. And all the time the builders of the machine fought against time and disease, trying to save their race ...

But couldn't Fleming see that *he* was the wrong matrix?

The Fleming-machine could not, for Howard fulfilled all the conditions. The last thing Howard saw was the sterile surface of a knife flashing toward him.

And the Fleming-machine processed the milling Howards, cut and sliced them, deep-froze and packaged them neatly, into great stacks of fried Howard, roast Howard, Howard with cream sauce, Howard with brown sauce, three-minute boiled Howard, Howard on the half-shell, Howard with pilaf, and especially Howard salad.

The food-duplication process was a success! The war could end, because now there was more than enough food for everyone. Food! Food for the starving billions on Paradise II!

ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE

THERE are regulations to govern the conduct of First Contact spaceships, rules drawn up in desperation and followed in despair, for what rule can predict the effect of any action upon the mentality of an alien people?

Jan Maarten was gloomily pondering this as he came into the atmosphere of Durell IV. He was a big, middle-aged man with thin ash-blond hair and a round worried face. Long ago, he had concluded that almost any rule was better than none. Therefore he followed his meticulously, but with an ever-present sense of uncertainty and human fallibility.

These were ideal qualifications for the job of First Contacter.

He circled the planet, low enough for observation, but not too low, since he didn't want to frighten the inhabitants. He noted the signs of a primitive-pastoral civilization and tried to remember everything he had learned in Volume 4, *Projected Techniques for First Contact on So-called Primitive-pastoral Worlds*, published by the Department of Alien Psychology. Then he brought the ship down on a rocky, grass-covered plain, near a typical medium-sized village, but not too near, using the Silent Sam landing technique.

"Prettily done," commented Croswell, his assistant, who was too young to be bothered by uncertainties.

Chedka, the Eborian linguist, said nothing. He was sleeping, as usual.

Maarten grunted something and went to the rear of the ship to run his tests. Croswell took up his post at the viewport.

"Here they come," Croswell reported half an hour later. "About a dozen of them, definitely humanoidal." Upon closer inspection, he saw that the natives of Durell were flabby, dead-white in coloration, and deadpan in expression. Croswell hesitated, then added, "They're not too handsome."

"What are they doing?" Maarten asked.

"Just looking us over," Croswell said. He was a slender young man with an unusually large and lustrous mustache which he had grown on the long journey out from Terra. He stroked it with the pride of a man who has been able to raise a really good mustache.

"They're about twenty yards from the ship now," Croswell reported. He leaned forward, flattening his nose ludicrously against the port, which was constructed of one-way glass.

Croswell could look out, but no one could look in. The Department of Alien Psychology had ordered the change last year, after a Department ship had botched a first contact on Carella II. The Carellans had stared into the ship, become alarmed at something within, and fled. The Department still didn't know what had alarmed them, for a second contact had never been successfully established.

That mistake would never happen again.

"What now?" Maarten called.

"One of them's coming forward alone. Chief, perhaps. Or sacrificial offering."

"What is he wearing?"

"He has on a—a sort of—will you kindly come here and look for yourself?"

Maarten, at his instrument bank, had been assembling a sketchy picture of Durell. The planet had a breathable atmosphere, an equitable climate, and gravity comparable to that of Earth. It had valuable

deposits of radioactives and rare metals. Best of all, it tested free of the virulent microorganisms and poisonous vapors which tended to make a Contacter's life feverishly short.

Durell was going to be a valuable neighbor to Earth, provided the natives were friendly—and the Contacters skillful.

Maarten walked to the viewport and studied the natives. "They are wearing pastel clothing. We shall wear pastel clothing."

"Check," said Croswell.

"They are unarmed. We shall go unarmed."

"Roger."

"They are wearing sandals. We shall wear sandals as well."

"To hear is to obey."

"I notice they have no facial hair," Maarten said, with the barest hint of a smile. "I'm sorry, Ed, but that mustache—"

"Not my mustache!" Croswell yelped, quickly putting a protective hand over it.

"I'm afraid so."

"But, Jan, I've been six months raising it!"

"It has to go. That should be obvious."

"I don't see why," Croswell said indignantly.

"Because first impressions are *vital*. When an unfavorable first impression has been made, subsequent contacts become difficult, sometimes impossible. Since we know nothing about these people, conformity is our safest course. We try to look like them, dress in colors that are pleasing, or at least acceptable to them, copy their gestures, interact within their framework of acceptance in every way—"

"All right, all right," Croswell said. "I suppose I can grow another on the way back."

They looked at each other; then both began laughing. Croswell had lost three mustaches in this manner.

While Croswell shaved, Maarten stirred their linguist into wakefulness. Chedka was a lemurlike humanoid from Eboria IV, one of the few planets where Earth maintained successful relations. The Eborians were natural linguists, aided by the kind of associative ability found in nuisances who supply words in conversation—only the Eborians were always right. They had wandered over a considerable portion of the Galaxy in their time and might have attained quite a place in it were it not that they needed twenty hours' sleep out of twenty-four.

Croswell finished shaving and dressed in pale green coveralls and sandals. All three stepped through the degermifier. Maarten took a deep breath, uttered a silent prayer, and opened the port.

A low sigh went up from the crowd of Durellans, although the chief—or sacrifice—was silent. They were indeed humanlike, if one overlooked their pallor and the gentle sheeplike blandness of their features—features upon which Maarten could read no trace of expression.

"Don't use any facial contortions," Maarten warned Croswell.

Slowly they advanced until they were ten feet from the leading Durellan. Then Maarten said in a low voice, "We come in peace."

Chedka translated, then listened to the answer, which was so soft as to be almost undecipherable.

"Chief says welcome," Chedka reported in his economical English.

"Good, good," Maarten said. He took a few more steps forward and began to speak, pausing every now and then for translation. Earnestly, and with extreme conviction, he intoned Primary Speech BB-32 (for humanoid, primitive-pastoral, tentatively nonaggressive aliens).

Even Croswell, who was impressed by very little, had to admit it was a fine speech. Maarten said they were wanderers from afar, come out of the Great Nothingness to engage in friendly discourse with the gentle people of Durell. He spoke of green and distant Earth, so like this planet, and of the fine and humble people of Earth who stretched out hands in greeting. He told of the great spirit of peace and cooperation that emanated from Earth, of universal friendship, and many other excellent things.

Finally he was done. There was a long silence.

"Did he understand it all?" Maarten whispered to Chedka.

The Eborian nodded, waiting for the chief's reply. Maarten was perspiring from the exertion, and Croswell couldn't stop nervously fingering his newly shaven upper lip.

The chief opened his mouth, gasped, made a little half turn, and collapsed to the ground.

It was an embarrassing moment and one uncovered by any amount of theory.

The chief didn't rise; apparently it was not a ceremonial fall. As a matter of fact, his breathing seemed labored, like that of a man in a coma.

Under the circumstances, the Contact team could only retreat to their ship and await further developments.

Half an hour later, a native approached the ship and conversed with Chedka, keeping a wary eye on the Earthmen and departing immediately.

"What did he say?" Croswell asked.

"Chief Moréri apologizes for fainting," Chedka told them. "He said it was inexcusably bad manners."

"Ah!" Maarten exclaimed. "His fainting might help us, after all—make him eager to repair his 'impoliteness.' Just as long as it was a fortuitous circumstance, unrelated to us—"

"Not," Chedka said.

"Not what?"

"Not unrelated," the Eborian said, curling up and going to sleep.

Maarten shook the little linguist awake. "What else did the chief say? How was his fainting related to us?"

Chedka yawned copiously. "The chief was very embarrassed. He faced the wind from your mouth as long as he could, but the alien odor—"

"My breath?" Maarten asked. "My breath knocked him out?"

Chedka nodded, giggled unexpectedly, and went to sleep.

Evening came, and the long dim twilight of Durell merged imperceptibly into night. In the village, cooking fires glinted through the surrounding forest and winked out one by one. But lights burned within the spaceship until dawn. And when the sun rose, Chedka slipped out of the ship on a mission into the village. Croswell brooded over his morning coffee, while Maarten rummaged through the ship's medicine chest.

"It's purely a temporary setback," Croswell was saying hopefully. "Little things like this are bound to happen. Remember that time on Dingoforeaba VI—"

"It's little things that close planets forever," Maarten said.

"But how could anyone possibly guess—"

"I should have foreseen it," Maarten growled angrily. "Just because our breath hasn't been offensive anywhere else—here it is!"

Triumphantly he held up a bottle of pink tablets. "Absolutely guaranteed to neutralize any breath, even that of a hyena. Have a couple."

Croswell accepted the pills. "Now what?"

"Now we wait until—aha! What did he say?"

Chedka slipped through the entry port, rubbing his eves. "The chief apologizes for fainting."

"We know that. What else?"

"He welcomes you to the village of Lannit at your convenience. The chief feels that this incident shouldn't alter the course of friendship between two peace-loving courteous peoples."

Maarten sighed with relief. He cleared his throat and asked hesitantly, "Did you mention to him about the forthcoming—ah—improvement in our breaths?"

"I assured him it would be corrected," Chedka said, "although it never bothered me."

"Fine, fine. We will leave for the village now. Perhaps you should take one of these pills?"

"There's nothing wrong with *my* breath," the Eborian said complacently.

They set out at once for the village of Lannit.

When one deals with a primitive-pastoral people, one looks for simple but highly symbolic gestures, since that is what they understand best. Imagery! Clear-cut and decisive parallels! Few words but many gestures! Those were the rules in dealing with primitive-pastorals.

As Maarten approached the village, a natural and highly symbolic ceremony presented itself. The natives were waiting in their village, which was in a clearing in the forest. Separating forest from village was a dry stream bed, and across that bed was a small stone bridge.

Maarten advanced to the center of the bridge and stopped, beaming benignly on the Durellans. When he saw several of them shudder and turn away, he smoothed out his features, remembering his own injunction on facial contortions. He paused for a long moment.

"What's up?" Croswell asked, stopping in front of the bridge.

In a loud voice, Maarten cried, "Let this bridge symbolize the link, now eternally forged, that joins this beautiful planet with—" Croswell called out a warning, but Maarten didn't know what was wrong. He stared at the villagers; they had made no movement.

"Get off the bridge!" Croswell shouted. But before Maarten could move, the entire structure had collapsed under him and he fell bone-shakingly into the dry stream.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw," Croswell said, helping him to his feet. "As soon as you raised your voice, that stone began to pulverize. Sympathetic vibration, I imagine."

Now Maarten understood why the Durellans spoke in whispers. He struggled to his feet, then groaned and sat down again.

"What's wrong?" Croswell asked.

"I seem to have wrenched my ankle," Maarten said miserably.

Chief Moréri came up, followed by twenty or so villagers, made a short speech and presented Maarten with a walking stick of carved and polished black wood.

"Thanks," Maarten muttered, standing up and leaning gingerly on the cane. "What did he say?" he asked Chedka.

"The chief said that the bridge was only a hundred years old and in good repair," Chedka translated. "He apologizes that his ancestors didn't build it better."

"Hmm," Maarten said.

"And the chief says that you are probably an unlucky man."

He might be right, Maarten thought. Or perhaps Earthmen were just a fumbling race. For all their good intentions, population after population feared them, hated them, envied them, mainly on the basis of unfavorable first impressions.

Still, there seemed to be a chance here. What else could go wrong?

Forcing a smile, then quickly erasing it, Maarten limped into the village beside Moréri.

Technologically, the Durellan civilization was of a low order. A limited use had been made of wheel and lever, but the concept of mechanical advantage had been carried no further. There was evidence of a rudimentary knowledge of plane geometry and a fair idea of astronomy.

Artistically, however, the Durellans were adept and surprisingly sophisticated, particularly in wood carving. Even the simplest huts had bas-relief panels, beautifully conceived and executed.

"Do you think I could take some photographs?" Croswell asked.

"I see no reason why not," Maarten said. He ran his finger lovingly over a large panel, carved of the same straight-grained black wood that formed his cane. The finish was as smooth as skin beneath his fingertips.

The chief gave his approval and Croswell took photographs and tracings of Durellan home, market, and temple decorations.

Maarten wandered around, gently touching the intricate bas-reliefs, speaking with some of the natives through Chedka and generally sorting out his impressions.

The Durrellans, Maarten judged, were highly intelligent and had a potential comparable to that of *Homo sapiens*. Their lack of a defined technology was more the expression of a cooperation with nature rather than a flaw in their makeup. They seemed inherently peace-loving and nonaggressive—valuable neighbors for an Earth that, after centuries of confusion, was striving toward a similar goal.

This was going to be the basis of his report to the Second Contact Team. With it, he hoped to be able to add, *A favorable impression seems to have been left concerning Earth. No unusual difficulties are to be expected*.

Chedka had been talking earnestly with Chief Moréri. Now looking slightly more wide awake than usual, he came over and conferred with Maarten in a hushed voice. Maarten nodded, keeping his face expressionless, and went over to Croswell, who was snapping his last photographs.

"All ready for the big show?" Maarten asked.

"What show?"

"Moréri is throwing a feast for us tonight," Maarten said. "Very big, very important feast. A final gesture of good will and all that." Although his tone was casual, there was a gleam of deep satisfaction in his eyes.

Croswell's reaction was more immediate. "Then we've made it! The contact is successful!"

Behind him, two natives shook at the loudness of his voice and tottered feebly away.

"We've made it," Maarten whispered, "if we watch our step. They're a fine, understanding people—but we do seem to grate on them a bit."

By evening, Maarten and Croswell had completed a chemical examination of the Durellan foods and found nothing harmful to humans. They took several more pink tablets, changed coveralls and sandals, bathed again in the degermifier, and proceeded to the feast.

The first course was an orange-green vegetable that tasted like squash. Then Chief Moréri gave a

short talk on the importance of intercultural relations. They were served a dish resembling rabbit, and Croswell was called upon to give a speech.

"Remember," Maarten whispered, "*whisper!*"

Croswell stood up and began to speak. Keeping his voice down and his face blank, he began to enumerate the many similarities between Earth and Durell, depending mainly on gestures to convey his message.

Chedka translated. Maarten nodded his approval. The chief nodded. The feasters nodded.

Croswell made his last points and sat down. Maarten clapped him on the shoulder. "Well done, Ed. You've got a natural gift for—what's wrong?"

Croswell had a startled and incredulous look on his face. "Look!"

Maarten turned. The chief and the feasters, their eyes open and staring, were still nodding.

"Chedka!" Maarten whispered. "Speak to them!"

The Eborian asked the chief a question. There was no response. The chief continued his rhythmic nodding.

"Those gestures!" Maarten said. "You must have hypnotized them!" He scratched his head, then coughed once, loudly. The Durellans stopped nodding, blinked their eyes, and began to talk rapidly and nervously among themselves.

"They say you've got some strong powers," Chedka translated at random. "They say that aliens are pretty queer people and doubt if they can be trusted."

"What does the chief say?" Maarten asked.

"The chief believes you're all right. He is telling them that you meant no harm."

"Good enough. Let's stop while we're ahead."

He stood up, followed by Croswell and Chedka.

"We are leaving now," he told the chief in a whisper, "but we beg permission for others of our kind to visit you. Forgive the mistakes we have made; they were due only to ignorance of your ways."

Chedka translated, and Maarten went on whispering, his face expressionless, his hands at his sides. He spoke of the oneness of the Galaxy, the joys of cooperation, peace, the exchange of goods and art, and the essential solidarity of all human life.

Moréri, though still a little dazed from the hypnotic experience, answered that the Earthmen would always be welcome.

Impulsively, Croswell held out his hand. The chief looked at it for a moment, puzzled, then took it, obviously wondering what to do with it and why.

He gasped in agony and pulled his hand back. They could see deep burns blotched red against his skin.

"What could have—"

"Perspiration!" Maarten said. "It's an acid. Must have an almost instantaneous effect upon their particular makeup. Let's get out of here."

The natives were milling together and they had picked up some stones and pieces of wood. The chief, although still in pain, was arguing with them, but the Earthmen didn't wait to hear the results of the discussion. They retreated to their ship, as fast as Maarten could hobble with the help of his cane.

The forest was dark behind them and filled with suspicious movements. Out of breath, they arrived at the spaceship. Croswell, in the lead, sprawled over a tangle of grass and fell head-first against the port with a resounding clang.

"Damn!" he howled in pain.

The ground rumbled beneath them, began to tremble and slide away.

"Into the ship!" Maarten ordered.

They managed to take off before the ground gave way completely.

"It must have been sympathetic vibration again," Croswell said, several hours later, when the ship was in space. "But of all the luck—to be perched on a rock fault!"

Maarten sighed and shook his head. "I really don't know what to do. I'd like to go back, explain to them, but—"

"We've outlived our welcome," Croswell said.

"Apparently. Blunders, nothing but blunders. We started out badly, and everything we did made it worse."

"It is not what you do," Chedka explained in the most sympathetic voice they had ever heard him use. "It's not your fault. It's what you are."

Maarten considered that for a moment. "Yes, you're right. Our voices shatter their land, our expressions disgust them, our gestures hypnotize them, our breath asphyxiates them, our perspiration burns them. Oh, Lord!"

"Lord, Lord," Croswell agreed glumly. "We're living chemical factories—only turning out poison gas and corrosives exclusively."

"But that is not *all* you are," Chedka said. "Look."

He held up Maarten's walking stick. Along the upper part, where Maarten had handled it, long-dormant buds had burst into pink and white flowers, and their scent filled the cabin.

"You see?" Chedka said. "You are *this*, also."

"That stick was dead," Croswell mused. "Some oil in our skin, I imagine."

Maarten shuddered. "Do you suppose that all the carvings we touched—the huts—the temple—"

"I should think so," Croswell said.

Maarten closed his eyes and visualized it, the sudden bursting into bloom of the dead, dried wood.

"I think they'll understand," he said, trying very hard to believe himself. "It's a pretty symbol and they're quite an understanding people. I think they'll approve of—well, at least *some* of the things we are."

PROTECTION

THERE'LL be an airplane crash in Burma next week, but it shouldn't affect me here in New York. And the feegs certainly can't harm me. Not with all my closet doors closed.

No, the big problem is lesnerizing. I must not lesnerize. Absolutely not. As you can imagine, that hampers me.

And to top it all, I think I'm catching a really nasty cold.

The whole thing started on the evening of November seventh. I was walking down Broadway on my way to Baker's Cafeteria. On my lips was a faint smile, due to having passed a tough physics exam earlier in the day. In my pocket, jingling faintly, were five coins, three keys, and a book of matches.

Just to complete the picture, let me add that the wind was from the northwest at five miles an hour, Venus was in the ascendancy, and the Moon was decidedly gibbous. You can draw your own conclusions from this.

I reached the corner of 98th Street and began to cross. As I stepped off the curb, someone yelled at me, "The truck! Watch the truck!"

I jumped back, looking around wildly. There was nothing in sight. Then, a full second later, a truck cut around the corner on two wheels, ran though the red light, and roared up Broadway. Without the warning, I would have been hit.

You've heard stories like this, haven't you? About the strange voice that warned Aunt Minnie to stay out of the elevator, which then crashed to the basement. Or maybe it told Uncle Joe not to sail on the *Titanic*. That's where the story usually ends.

I wish mine ended there.

"Thanks, friend," I said and looked around. There was no one there.

"Can you still hear me?" the voice asked.

"Sure I can." I turned a complete circle and stared suspiciously at the closed apartment windows overhead. "But where in the blue blazes are you?"

"Gronish," the voice answered. "Is that the referrent? Refraction index. Creature of insubstantiality. The Shadow knows. Did I pick the right one?"

"You're invisible?" I hazarded.

"That's it!"

"But *what* are you?'

"A validusian derg."

"A what?"

"I am—open your larynx a little wider please. Let me see now. I am the Spirit of Christmas Past. The Creature from the Black Lagoon. The Bride of Frankenstein. The—"

"Hold on," I said. "What are you trying to tell me—that you're a ghost or a creature from another planet?"

"Same thing," the derg replied. "Obviously."

That made it all perfectly clear. Any fool could see that the voice belonged to someone from another planet. He was invisible on Earth, but his superior senses had spotted an approaching danger and warned me of it.

Just a plain, everyday supernormal incident.

I began to walk hurriedly down Broadway.

"What is the matter?" the invisible derg asked.

"Not a thing," I answered, "except that I seem to be standing in the middle of the street talking to an invisible alien from the farthest reaches of outer space. I suppose only I can hear you?"

"Well, naturally."

"Great! You know where this sort of thing will land me?"

"The concept you are sub-vocalizing is not entirely clear."

"The loony bin. Nut house. Bug factory. Psychotic ward. That's where they put people who talk to invisible aliens. Thanks for the warning, buddy. Good night."

Feeling light-headed, I turned east, hoping my invisible friend would continue down Broadway.

"Won't you talk with me?" the derg asked.

I shook my head, a harmless gesture they can't pick you up for, and kept on walking.

"But you *must*," the derg said with a hint of desperation "A real sub-vocal contact is very rare and astonishingly difficult. Sometimes I can get across a warning, just before a danger moment. But then the connection fades."

So there was the explanation for Aunt Minnie's premonition. But I still wasn't having any.

"Conditions might not be right again for a hundred years!" the derg mourned.

What conditions? Five coins and three keys jingling together when Venus was ascendant? I suppose it's worthy of investigation—but not by me. You never can prove that supernormal stuff. There are enough people knitting slipcovers for straitjackets without me swelling their ranks.

"Just leave me alone," I said. A cop gave me a funny look for that one. I grinned boyishly and hurried on.

"I appreciate your social situation," the derg urged, "but this contact is in your own best interests. I want to protect you from the myriad dangers of human existence."

I didn't answer him.

"Well," the derg said, "I can't force you. I'll just have to offer my services elsewhere. Good-bye, friend."

I nodded pleasantly.

"One last thing," he said. "Stay off subways tomorrow between noon and one-fifteen P.M. Good-bye."

"Huh? Why?"

"Someone will be killed at Columbus Circle, pushed in front of a train by shopping crowds. You, if you are there. Good-by."

"Someone will be killed there tomorrow?" I asked. "You're sure?"

"Of course."

"It'll be in the newspapers?"

"I should imagine so."

"And you know all sorts of stuff like that?"

"I can perceive all dangers radiating toward you and extending into time. My one desire is to protect you from them."

I had stopped. Two girls were giggling at me talking to myself. Now I began walking again.

"Look," I whispered, "can you wait until tomorrow evening?"

"You will let me be your protector?" the derg asked eagerly.

"I'll tell you tomorrow," I said. "After I read the late papers."

The item was there, all right. I read it in my furnished room on 113th Street. Man pushed by the crowd, lost his balance, fell in front of an oncoming train. This gave me a lot to think about while waiting for my invisible protector to show up.

I didn't know what to do. His desire to protect me seemed genuine enough. But I didn't know if I wanted it. When, an hour later, the derg contacted me, I liked the whole idea even less, and told him so.

"Don't you trust me?" he asked.

"I just want to lead a normal life."

"If you lead any life at all," he reminded me. "That truck last night—"

"That was a freak, a once-in-a-lifetime hazard."

"It only takes once in a lifetime to die," the derg said solemnly. "There was the subway, too."

"That doesn't count. I hadn't planned on riding it today."

"But you had no reason not to ride it. That's the important thing. Just as you have no reason not to take a shower in the next hour."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"A Miss Flynn," the derg said, "who lives down the hall, has just completed her shower and has left a bar of melting pink soap on the pink tile in the bathroom on this floor. You would have slipped on it and suffered a sprained wrist."

"Not fatal, huh?"

"No. Hardly in the same class with, let us say, a heavy flowerpot pushed from a rooftop by a certain unstable old gentleman."

"When is that going to happen?" I asked.

"I thought you weren't interested."

"I'm very interested. When? Where?"

"Will you let me continue to protect you?" he asked.

"Just tell me one thing," I said. "What's in this for you?"

"Satisfaction!" he said. "For a validusian derg, the greatest thrill possible is to aid another creature evade danger."

"But isn't there something else you want out of it? Some trifle like my soul, or rulership of Earth?"

"Nothing! To accept payment for Protecting would ruin the emotional experience. All I want out of life—all any derg wants—is to protect someone from the dangers he cannot see, but which we can see all too well." The derg paused, then added softly, "We don't even expect gratitude."

Well, that clinched it. How could I guess the consequences? How could I know that his aid would lead me into a situation in which I must not lesnerize?

"What about that flowerpot?" I asked.

"It will be dropped on the corner of Tenth Street and McAdams Boulevard at eight-thirty tomorrow morning."

"Tenth and McAdams? Where's that?"

"In Jersey City," he answered promptly.

"But I've never been to Jersey City in my life! Why warn me about that?"

"I don't know where you will or won't go," the derg said. "I merely perceive dangers to you wherever they may occur."

"What should I do now?"

"Anything you wish," he told me. "Just lead your normal life."

Normal life. Hah!

It started out well enough. I attended classes at Columbia, did homework, saw movies, went on dates, played table tennis and chess, all as before. At no time did I let on that I was under the direct protection of a validusian derg.

Once or twice a day, the derg would come to me. He would say something like, "Loose grating on West End Avenue between 66th and 67th Streets. Don't walk on it."

And of course I wouldn't. But someone else would. I often saw these items in the newspapers.

Once I got used to it, it gave me quite a feeling of security. An alien was scurrying around twenty-four hours a day and all he wanted out of life was to protect me. A supernormal bodyguard! The thought gave me an enormous amount of confidence.

My social life, during this period, couldn't have been improved upon.

But the derg soon became overzealous in my behalf. He began finding more and more dangers, most of which had no real bearing on my life in New York—things I should avoid in Mexico City, Toronto, Omaha, Papeete.

I finally asked him if he was planning on reporting every potential danger on Earth.

"These are the few, the very few, that you are or may be affected by," he told me.

"In Mexico City? And Papeete? Why not confine yourself to the local picture? Greater New York, say."

"Locale means nothing to me," the derg replied stubbornly. "My perceptions are temporal, not spatial. I must protect you from *everything!*"

It was rather touching, in a way, and there was nothing I could do about it. I simply had to discard from his reports the various dangers in Hoboken, Thailand, Kansas City, Angkor Wat (collapsing statue), Paris, and Sarasota. Then I would reach the local stuff. I would ignore, for the most part, the dangers awaiting me in Queens, the Bronx, Staten Island, and Brooklyn, and concentrate on Manhattan.

These were often worth waiting for, however. The derg saved me from some pretty nasty experiences—a holdup on Cathedral Parkway, for example, a teenage mugging, a fire.

But he kept stepping up the pace. It had started as a report or two a day. Within a month, he was warning me five or six times a day. And at last his warnings, local, national, and international, flowed in a continual stream.

I was facing too many dangers, beyond all reasonable probability.

On a typical day:

"Tainted food in Baker's Cafeteria. Don't eat there tonight."

"Amsterdam Bus 312 has bad brakes. Don't ride it."

"Mellen's Tailor Shop has a leaking gas line. Explosion due. Better have your clothes dry-cleaned elsewhere."

"Rabid mongrel on the prowl between Riverside Drive and Central Park West. Take a taxi."

Soon I was spending most of my time not doing things and avoiding places. Danger seemed to be lurking behind every lamp post, waiting for me.

I suspected the derg of padding his report. It seemed the only possible explanation. After all, I had

lived this long before meeting him, with no supernormal assistance whatsoever, and had gotten by nicely. Why should the risks increase now?

I asked him that one evening.

"All my reports are perfectly genuine," he said, obviously a little hurt. "If you don't believe me, try turning on the lights in your psychology class tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Defective wiring."

"I don't doubt your warnings." I assured him. "I just know that life was never this dangerous before you came along."

"Of course it wasn't. Surely you know that if you accept protection, you must accept the drawbacks of protection as well."

"Drawbacks like what?"

The derg hesitated. "Protection begets the need of further protection. That is a universal constant."

"Come again?" I asked in bewilderment.

"Before you met me, you were like everyone else and you ran such risks as your situation offered. But with my coming your immediate environment has changed. And your position in it has changed, too."

"Changed? Why?"

"Because it has me in it. To some extent now, you partake of my environment, just as I partake of yours. And, of course, it is well known that the avoidance of one danger opens the path to others."

"Are you trying to tell me," I said, very slowly, "that my risks have increased because of your help?"

"It was unavoidable," he sighed.

I could have cheerfully strangled the derg at that moment, if he hadn't been invisible and impalpable. I had the angry feeling that I had been conned, taken by an extraterrestrial trickster.

"All right," I said, controlling myself. "Thanks for everything. See you on Mars or wherever you hang out."

"You don't want any further protection?"

"You guessed it. Don't slam the door on your way out."

"But what's wrong?" The derg seemed genuinely puzzled. "There are increased risks in your life, true, but what of it? It is a glory and an honor to face danger and emerge victorious. The greater the peril, the greater the joy of evading it."

For the first time, I saw how alien this alien was.

"Not for me," I said. "Scram."

"Your risks have increased," the derg argued, "but my capacity for detection is more than ample to cope with it. I am happy to cope with it. So it still represents a net gain in protection for you."

I shook my head. "I know what happens next. My risks just keep on increasing, don't they?"

"Not at all. As far as accidents are concerned, you have reached the quantitative limit."

"What does that mean?"

"It means there will be no further increase in the number of accidents you must avoid."

"Good. Now will you please get the hell out of here?"

"But I just explained—"

"Sure, no further increase, just more of the same. Look, if you leave me alone, my original environment will return, won't it? And, with it, my original risks?"

"Eventually," the derg agreed. "If you survive."

"I'll take that chance."

The derg was silent for a time. Finally he said, "You can't afford to send me away. Tomorrow—"

"Don't tell me. I'll avoid the accidents on my own."

"I wasn't thinking of accidents."

"What then?"

"I hardly know how to tell you." He sounded embarrassed. "I said there would be no further quantitative change. But I didn't mention a qualitative change."

"What are you talking about?" I shouted at him.

"I'm trying to say," the derg said, "that a gamper is after you."

"A what? What kind of a gag is this?"

"A gamper is a creature from my environment. I suppose he was attracted by your increased potentiality for avoiding risk, due to my protection."

"To hell with the gamper and to hell with you."

"If he comes, try driving him off with mistletoe. Iron is often effective, if bonded to copper. Also —"

I threw myself on the bed and buried my head under the pillow. The derg took the hint. In a moment, I could sense that he was gone.

What an idiot I had been! We denizens of Earth have a common vice: We take what we're offered, whether we need it or not.

You can get into a lot of trouble that way.

But the derg was gone, and the worst of my troubles were over. I'd sit tight for a while, give things a chance to work themselves out. In a few weeks, perhaps, I'd ...

There seemed to be a humming in the air.

I sat upright on the bed. One corner of the room was curiously dark, and I could feel a cold breeze on my face. The hum grew louder—not really a hum, but laughter, low and monotonous.

At that point, no one had to draw me a diagram.

"Derg!" I screamed. "Get me out of this!"

He was there. "Mistletoe! Just wave it at the gamper."

"Where in blazes would I get mistletoe?"

"Iron and copper then!"

I leaped to my desk, grabbed a copper paperweight, and looked wildly for some iron to bond it to. The paperweight was pulled out of my hand. I caught it before it fell. Then I saw my fountain pen and brought the point against the paperweight.

The darkness vanished. The cold disappeared.

I guess I passed out.

The derg said triumphantly, an hour later, "You see? You need my protection."

"I suppose I do," I answered dully.

"You will need some things," the derg said. "Wolfsbane, amarinth, garlic, graveyard mold—"

"But the gamper is gone."

"Yes. However, the grailers remain. And you need safeguards against the leeps, the feegs, and the melgerizer."

So I wrote down his list of herbs, essences, and specifics. I didn't bother asking him about this link between supernatural and supernormal. My comprehension was now full and complete.

Ghosts and spirits? Or extraterrestrials? All the same, he said, and I saw what he meant. They leave us alone, for the most part. We are on different levels of perception, of existence, even. Until a human is foolish enough to attract attention to himself.

Now I was in their game. Some wanted to kill me, some to protect me, but none cared for me, not even the derg. They were interested solely in my value to the game, if that's what it was.

And the situation was my own fault. At the beginning, I had had the accumulated wisdom of the human race at my disposal, that tremendous racial hatred of witches and ghosts, the irrational fear of alien life. For my adventure has been played out a thousand times and the story is told again and again —how a man dabbles in strange arts and calls to himself a spirit. By so doing, he attracts attention to himself—the worst thing of all.

So I was welded inseparably to the derg and the derg to me. Until yesterday, that is. Now I am on my own again.

Things had been quiet for a few weeks. I had held off the feegs by the simple expedient of keeping my closet doors closed. The leeps were more menacing, but the eye of a toad seemed to stop them. And the melgerizer was dangerous only in the full of the moon.

"You are in danger," the derg said yesterday.

"Again?" I asked, yawning.

"It is the thrang who pursues us."

"Us?"

"Yes, myself as well as you, for even a derg must run risk and danger."

"Is this thrang particularly dangerous?"

"Very."

"Well, what do I do? Snakeskin over the door? A pentagon?"

"None of those," the derg said. "The thrang must be dealt with negatively, by the avoidance of certain actions."

By now, there were so many restrictions on me, I didn't think another would matter. "What shouldn't I do?"

"You must not lesnerize," the derg said.

"Lesnerize?" I frowned. "What's that?"

"Surely you know. It is a simple, everyday human action."

"I probably know it under a different name. Explain."

"Very well. To lesnerize is to—" He stopped abruptly.

"What?"

"It is here! The thrang!"

I backed up against a wall. I thought I could detect a faint stirring of dust, but that might have been no more than overwrought nerves.

"Derg!" I shouted. "Where are you? What should I do?"

I heard a shriek and the unmistakable sound of jaws snapping.

The derg cried, "It has me!"

"What should I do?" I cried again.

There was a horrible noise of teeth grinding. Very faintly, I heard the derg say, "*Don't lesnerize!*"

And then there was silence.

So I'm sitting tight now. There'll be an airplane crash in Burma next week, but it shouldn't affect

me here in New York. And the feegs certainly can't harm me. Not with all my closet doors closed.

No, the problem is lesnerizing, I must *not* lesnerize. Absolutely not. If I can keep from lesnerizing, everything will pass and the chase will move elsewhere. It must! All I have to do is wait them out.

The trouble is, I don't have any idea what lesnerizing might be. A common human action, the derg had said. Well, for the time, I'm avoiding as many actions as possible.

I've caught up on some back sleep and nothing happened, so that's not lesnerizing. I went out and bought food, paid for it, cooked it, ate it. That wasn't lesnerizing. I wrote this report. That wasn't lesnerizing.

I'll come out of this yet.

I'm going to catch a nap. I think I have a cold coming on. Now I have to sneez

THE NATIVE PROBLEM

EDWARD Danton was a misfit. Even as a baby, he had shown pre-antisocial leanings. This should have been sufficient warning to his parents, whose duty it was to take him without delay to a competent prepubescent psychologist. Such a man could have discovered what lay in Danton's childhood to give him these contra-group tendencies. But Danton's parents, doubtless dramatizing problems of their own, thought the child would grow out of it.

He never did.

In school, Danton got barely passing grades in Group Acculturation, Sibling Fit, Values Recognition, Folkways Judgment, and other subjects which a person must know in order to live serenely in the modern world. Because of his lack of comprehension, Danton could never live serenely in the modern world.

It took him a while to find this out.

From his appearance, one would never have guessed Danton's basic lack of Fit. He was a tall, athletic young man, green-eyed, easy-going. There was a certain something about him which considerably intrigued the girls in his immediate affective environment. In fact, several paid him the highest compliment at their command, which was to consider him as a possible husband.

But even the flightiest girl could not ignore Danton's lacks. He was liable to weary after only a few hours of Mass Dancing, when the fun was just beginning. At Twelve-hand Bridge, Danton's attention frequently wandered and he would be forced to ask for a recount of the bidding, to the disgust of the other eleven players. And he was impossible at Subways.

He tried hard to master the spirit of that classic game. Locked arm in arm with his teammates, he would thrust forward into the subway car, trying to take possession before another team could storm in the opposite doors.

His group captain would shout, "Forward, men! We're taking this car to Rockaway!" And the opposing group captain would scream back, "Never! Rally, boys! It's Bronx Park or bust!"

Danton would struggle in the close-packed throng, a fixed smile on his face, worry lines etched around his mouth and eyes. His girlfriend of the moment would say, "What's wrong, Edward? Aren't you having fun?"

"Sure I am," Danton would reply, gasping for breath.

"But you aren't!" the girl would cry, perplexed. "Don't you realize, Edward, that this is the way our ancestors worked off their aggressions? Historians say that the game of Subways averted an all-out hydrogen war. *We* have those same aggressions and we, too, must resolve them in a suitable social context."

"Yeah, I know," Edward Danton would say. "I really do enjoy this. I—oh, Lord!"

For at that moment, a third group would come pounding in, arms locked, chanting, "Canarsie, Canarsie, Canarsie!"

In that way, he would lose another girlfriend, for there was obviously no future in Danton. Lack of Fit can never be disguised. It was obvious that Danton would never be happy in the New York suburbs which stretched from Rockport, Maine, to Norfolk, Virginia; nor in any other suburbs, for that matter.

Danton tried to cope with his problems, in vain. Other strains started to show. He began to develop astigmatism from the projection of advertisements on his retina, and there was a constant

ringing in his ears from the sing-swoop ads. His doctor warned that symptom analysis would never rid him of these psychosomatic ailments. No, what had to be treated was Danton's basic neurosis, his antisociality. But this Danton found impossible to deal with.

And so his thoughts turned irresistibly to escape. There was plenty of room for Earth's misfits out in space.

During the last two centuries, millions of psychotics, neurotics, psychopaths, and cranks of every kind and description had gone outward to the stars. The early ones had the Mikkelsen Drive to power their ships, and spent twenty or thirty years chugging from star system to star system. The newer ships were powered by GM subspatial torque converters, and made the same journey in a matter of months.

The stay-at-homes, being socially adjusted, bewailed the loss of anyone, but they welcomed the additional breeding room.

In his twenty-seventh year, Danton decided to leave Earth and take up pioneering. It was a tearful day when he gave his breeding certificate to his best friend, Al Trevor.

"Gee, Edward," Trevor said, turning the precious little certificate over and over in his hands, "you don't know what this means to Myrtle and me. We always wanted two kids. Now because of you —"

"Forget it," said Danton. "Where I'm going, I won't need any breeding permit. As a matter of fact, I'll probably find it impossible to breed," he added, the thought having just struck him.

"But won't that be frustrating for you?" Al asked, always solicitous for his friend's welfare.

"I guess so. Maybe after a while, though, I'll find a girl pioneer. And in the meantime, there's always sublimation."

"True enough. What substitute have you selected?"

"Vegetable gardening. I might as well be practical."

"You might as well," Al said, "Well, boy, good luck, boy."

Once the breeding certificate was gone, the die was cast. Danton plunged boldly ahead. In exchange for his Birthright, the government gave him unlimited free transportation and two years' basic equipment and provisions.

Danton left at once.

He avoided the more heavily populated areas, which were usually in the hands of rabid little groups.

He wanted no part of a place like Korani II, for instance, where a giant calculator had instituted a reign of math.

Nor was he interested in Heil V, where a totalitarian population of 342 was earnestly planning ways and means of conquering the Galaxy.

He skirted the Farming Worlds, dull, restrictive places given to extreme health theories and practices.

When he came to Hedonia, he considered settling on that notorious planet. But the men of Hedonia were said to be short-lived, although no one denied their enjoyment while they *did* live.

Danton decided in favor of the long haul, and journeyed on.

He passed the Mining Worlds, somber, rocky places sparsely populated by gloomy, bearded men given to sudden violence. And he came at last to the New Territories. These unpeopled worlds were past Earth's farthest frontier. Danton scanned several before he found one with no intelligent life whatsoever.

It was a calm and watery place, dotted with sizeable islands, lush with jungle green and fertile

with fish and game. The ship's captain duly notarized Danton's claim to the planet, which Danton called New Tahiti. A quick survey showed a large island superior to the rest. Here he was landed, and here he proceeded to set up his camp.

There was much to be done at first. Danton constructed a house out of branches and woven grass, near a white and gleaming beach. He fashioned a fishing spear, several snares, and a net. He planted his vegetable garden and was gratified to see it thrive under the tropic sun, nourished by warm rains which fell every morning between seven and seven-thirty.

All in all, New Tahiti was a paradisical place and Danton should have been very happy there. But there was one thing wrong.

The vegetable garden, which he had thought would provide first-class sublimation, proved a dismal failure. Danton found himself thinking about women at all hours of the day and night, and spending long hours crooning to himself—love songs, of course—beneath a great orange tropic moon.

This was unhealthy. Desperately he threw himself into other recognized forms of sublimation; painting came first but he rejected it to keep a journal, abandoned that and composed a sonata, gave that up and carved two enormous statues out of a local variety of soapstone, completed them and tried to think of something else to do.

There was nothing else to do. His vegetables took excellent care of themselves; being of Earth stock, they completely choked out all alien growths. Fish swam into his nets in copious quantities, and meat was his whenever he bothered to set a snare. He found again that he was thinking of women at all hours of the day and night—tall women, short women, white women, black women, brown women.

The day came when Danton found himself thinking favorably of Martian women, something no Terran had succeeded in doing before. Then he knew that something drastic had to be done.

But what? He had no way of signaling for help, no way of getting off New Tahiti. He was gloomily contemplating this when a black speck appeared in the sky to seaward.

He watched as it slowly grew larger, barely able to breathe for fear it would turn out to be a bird or huge insect. But the speck continued to increase in size, and soon he could see pale jets, flaring and ebbing.

A spaceship had come! He was alone no longer!

The ship took a long, slow, cautious time landing. Danton changed into his best *pareu*, a South Seas garment he had found peculiarly well adapted to the climate of New Tahiti. He washed, combed his hair carefully, and watched the ship descend.

It was one of the ancient Mikkelsen Drive ships. Danton had thought that all of them were long retired from active service. But this ship, it was apparent, had been traveling for a long while. The hull was dented and scored, hopelessly archaic, yet with a certain indomitable look about it. Its name, proudly lettered on the bow, was *The Hutter People*.

When people come in from deep space, they are usually starved for fresh food. Danton gathered a great pile of fruit for the ship's passengers and had it tastefully arranged by the time *The Hutter People* had landed ponderously on the beach.

A narrow hatch opened and two men stepped out. They were armed with rifles and dressed in black from head to toe. Warily they looked around them.

Danton sprinted over. "Hey, welcome to New Tahiti! Boy, am I glad to see you folks! What's the latest news from—"

"Stand back!' shouted one of the men. He was in his fifties, tall and impossibly gaunt, his face seamed and hard. His icy blue eyes seemed to pierce Danton like an arrow; his rifle was leveled at

Danton's chest. His partner was younger, barrel-chested, broad-faced, short, and very powerfully built.

"Something wrong?" Danton asked, stopping.

"What's your name?"

"Edward Danton."

"I'm Simeon Smith," the gaunt man said, "military commander of the Hutter people. This is Jedekiah Franker, second-in-command. How come you speak English?"

"I've always spoken English," said Danton. "Look, I—"

"Where are the others? Where are they hiding?"

"There aren't any others. Just me." Danton looked at the ship and saw the faces of men and women at every port. "I gathered this stuff for you folks." He waved his hand at the mound of fruit. "Thought you might want some fresh goods after being so long in space."

A pretty girl with short, tousled blonde hair appeared in the hatchway. "Can't we come out now, Father?"

"No!" Simeon said. "It's not safe. Get inside, Anita."

"I'll watch from here, then," she said, staring at Danton with frankly curious eyes.

Danton stared back and a faint and unfamiliar tremor ran through him.

Simeon said, "We accept your offering. We will not, however, eat it."

"Why not?" Danton reasonably wanted to know.

"Because," said Jedekiah, "we don't know what poisons you people might try to feed us."

"Poisons? Look, let's sit down and talk this over."

"What do you think?" Jedekiah asked Simeon.

"Just what I expected," the military leader said. "Ingratiating, fawning, undoubtedly treacherous. His people won't show themselves. Waiting in ambush, I'll bet. I think an object lesson would be in order."

"Right," said Jedekiah, grinning. "Put the fear of civilization into them." He aimed his rifle at Danton's chest.

"Hey!" Danton yelped, backing away.

"But, Father," said Anita, "he hasn't done anything yet."

"That's the whole point. Shoot him and he *won't* do anything. The only good native is a dead native."

"This way," Jedekiah put in, "the rest will know we mean business."

"It isn't right!" Anita cried indignantly. "The Council—"

"—isn't in command now. An alien landfall constitutes an emergency. During such times, the military is in charge. We'll do what we think best. Remember Lan II!"

"Hold on now," Danton said. "You've got this all wrong. There's just me, no others, no reason to —"

A bullet kicked sand near his left foot. He sprinted for the protection of the jungle. Another bullet whined close and a third cut a twig near his head as he plunged into the underbrush.

"There!" he heard Simeon roar. "That ought to teach them a lesson!"

Danton kept on running until he had put half a mile of jungle between himself and the pioneer ship.

He ate a light supper of the local variety of bananas and breadfruit, and tried to figure out what was wrong with the Hutters. Were they insane? They had seen that he was an Earthman, alone and unarmed, obviously friendly. Yet they had fired at him—as an object lesson. A lesson for whom? For the dirty natives, whom they wanted to teach a lesson ...

That was it! Danton nodded emphatically to himself. The Hutters must have thought he was a native, an aboriginal, and that his tribe was lurking in the bush, waiting for a chance to massacre the new arrivals! It wasn't too rash an assumption, really. Here he was on a distant planet, without a spaceship, wearing only a loincloth and tanned a medium bronze. He was probably just what they thought a native should look like on a wilderness planet like this!

"But where," Danton asked himself, "do they think I learned English?"

The whole thing was ridiculous. He started walking back to the ship, sure he could clear up the misunderstanding in a few minutes. But after a couple yards, he stopped.

Evening was approaching. Behind him, the sky was banked in white and gray clouds. To seaward, a deep blue haze advanced steadily on the land. The jungle was filled with ominous noises, which Danton had long ago found to be harmless. But the new arrivals might not think so.

These people were trigger-happy, he reminded himself. No sense barging in on them too fast and inviting a bullet.

So he moved cautiously through the tangled jungle growth, a silent, tawny shape blending into the jungle browns and greens. When he reached the vicinity of the ship, he crawled through the dense undergrowth until he could peer down on the sloping beach.

The pioneers had finally come out of their ship. There were several dozen men and women and a few children. All were dressed in heavy black cloth and perspiring in the heat. They had ignored his gift of local fruit. Instead, an aluminum table had been spread with the spaceship's monotonous provisions.

On the periphery of the crowd, Danton saw several men with rifles and ammunition belts. They were evidently on guard, keeping close watch on the jungle and glancing apprehensively overhead at the darkening sky.

Simeon raised his hands. There was immediate silence.

"Friends," the military leader orated, "we have come at last to our long-awaited home! Behold, here is a land of milk and honey, a place of bounty and abundance. Was it not worth the long voyage, the constant danger, the endless search?"

"Yes, brother!" the people responded.

Simeon held up his hands again for silence. "No civilized man has settled upon this planet. We are the first, and therefore the place is ours. But there are perils, my friends! Who knows what strange monsters the jungle hides?"

"Nothing larger than a chipmunk," Danton muttered to himself. "Why don't they ask me? I'd tell them."

"Who knows what leviathan swims in the deep?" Simeon continued. "We *do* know one thing: There is an aboriginal people here, naked and savage, undoubtedly cunning, ruthless, and amoral, as aboriginals always are. Of these we must beware. We will live in peace with them, if they will let us. We will bring to them the fruits of civilization and the flowers of culture. They may profess friendship, but always remember this, friends: No one can tell what goes on in a savage heart. Their standards are not ours; their morals are not ours. We cannot trust them; we must be forever on guard. And if in doubt, *we* must shoot first! Remember Lan II!"

Everybody applauded, sang a hymn, and began their evening meal. As night fell, searchlights came on from the ship, making the beach bright as day. The sentries paced up and down, shoulders hunched nervously, rifles ready.

Danton watched the settlers shake out their sleeping bags and retire under the bulge of the ship. Even their fear of sudden attack couldn't force them to spend another night inside the ship, when there

was fresh air to breathe outside.

The great orange moon of New Tahiti was half-hidden by high-flying night clouds. The sentries paced and swore, and moved closer together for mutual comfort and protection. They began firing at the jungle sounds and blasting at shadows.

Danton crept back into the jungle. He retired for the night behind a tree, where he would be safe from stray bullets. This evening had not seemed the time for straightening things out. The Hutters were too jumpy. It would be better, he decided, to handle the matter by daylight, in a simple, straightforward, reasonable fashion.

The trouble was, the Hutters hardly seemed reasonable.

In the morning, though, everything looked more promising. Danton waited until the Hutters had finished their breakfast, then strolled into view at the edge of the beach.

"Halt!" every one of the sentries barked.

"That savage is back!" called a settler.

"Mummy," cried a little boy, "don't let the nasty bad man eat me!"

"Don't worry, dear," the boy's mother said. "Your father has a rifle for shooting savages."

Simeon rushed out of the spaceship and glared at Danton. "All right, you! Come forward!"

Danton stepped gingerly across the beach, his skin tingling with nervous expectation. He walked to Simeon, keeping his empty hands in sight.

"I am the leader of these people," Simeon said, speaking very slowly, as if to a child. "I the big chief fella. You big fella chief your people?"

"There's no need to talk that way," Danton said. "I can hardly understand you. I told you yesterday that I haven't any people. There's just me."

Simeon's hard face grew white with anger. "Unless you're honest with me, you're going to regret it. Now—where is your tribe?"

"I'm an Earthman," Danton yelled. "Are you deaf? Can't you hear how I talk?"

A stooped little man with white hair and great horn-rimmed glasses came over with Jedekiah. "Simeon," the little man said, "I don't believe I have met our guest."

"Professor Baker," said Simeon, "this savage here claims he's an Earthman, and he says his name is Edward Danton."

The professor glanced at Danton's *pareu*, his tanned skin and calloused feet. "You are an Earthman?" he asked Danton.

"Of course."

"Who carved those stone statues up the beach?"

"I did," Danton said, "but it was just therapy. You see—"

"Obviously primitive work. That stylization, those noses—"

"It was accidental, then. Look, a few months ago I left Earth in a spaceship—"

"How was it powered?" Professor Baker asked.

"By a GM subspatial torque converter." Baker nodded, and Danton went on. "Well, I wasn't interested in places like Korani or Heil V, and Hedonia seemed too rich for my blood. I passed up the Mining Worlds and the Farming Worlds, and had the government ship drop me here. The planet's registered as New Tahiti, in my name. But I was getting pretty lonely, so I'm glad you folks came."

"Well, Professor?" Simeon said. "What do you think?"

"Amazing," Baker murmured, "truly amazing. His grasp of colloquial English bespeaks a fairly high level of intelligence, which points up a phenomenon frequently met with in savage societies, namely, an unusually well-developed power of mimicry. Our friend Danta (as his original,

uncorrupted name must have been) will probably be able to tell us many tribal legends, myths, songs, dances—"

"But I'm an Earthman!"

"No, my poor friend," the professor corrected gently, "you are not. Obviously you have *met* an Earthman. Some trader, I daresay, stopping for repairs."

Jedekiah said, "There's evidence that a spaceship once landed here briefly."

"Ah," said Professor Baker, beaming. "Confirmation of my hypothesis."

"That was the government ship," Danton explained. "It dropped me off here."

"It is interesting to note," said Professor Baker in his lecturing voice, "how his almost-plausible story lapses into myth at various crucial points. He claims that the ship was powered by a 'GM subspatial torque converter'—which is nonsense syllabification, since the only deep-space drive is the Mikkelsen. He claims that the journey from Earth was made in a matter of months (since his untutored mind cannot conceive of a journey lasting years), although we know that no space drive, even theoretically, can achieve that."

"It was probably developed after you people left Earth," Danton said. "How long have you been gone?"

"The Hutter spaceship left Earth one hundred and twenty years ago," Baker replied condescendingly. "We are mostly fourth and fifth generation. Note also," Baker said to Simeon and Jedekiah, "his attempt to think up plausible place-names. Words such as Korani, Heil, Hedonia appeal to his sense of onomatopoeia. That there are no such places doesn't disturb him."

"There are!" Danton said indignantly.

"Where?" Jedekiah challenged. "Give me the co-ordinates."

"How should I know? I'm no navigator. I think Heil was near Boötes, or maybe it was Cassiopeia. No, I'm pretty sure it was Boötes—"

"I'm sorry, friend," said Jedekiah. "It may interest you to know that I'm the ship's navigator. I can show you the star atlases and charts. Those places aren't on them."

"Your charts are a hundred years out of date!"

"Then so are the stars," Simeon said. "Now, Danta, where is your tribe? Why do they hide from us? What are they planning?"

"This is preposterous," Danton protested. "What can I do to convince you? I'm an Earthman. I was born and raised—"

"That's enough," Simeon cut in. "If there's one thing we Hutters won't stand for, it's backtalk from natives. Out with it, Danta. *Where are your people?*"

"There's only me," Danton insisted.

"Tight-mouthed?" Jedekiah gritted. "Maybe a taste of the blacksnake whip—"

"Later, later," Simeon said. "His tribe'll come around for handouts. Natives always do. In the meantime, Danta, you can join that work gang over there, unloading the supplies."

"No, thanks," said Danton. "I'm going back to—"

Jedekiah's fist lashed out, catching Danton on the side of the jaw. He staggered, barely keeping his footing.

"The chief said *no backtalk!*" Jedekiah roared. "Why are you natives always so bone-lazy? You'll be paid as soon as we unload the beads and calico. Now get to work."

That seemed to be the last word on the subject. Dazed and unsure, much like millions of natives before him on a thousand different worlds. Danton joined the long line of colonists passing goods out of the ship.

By late afternoon, the unloading was done and the settlers were relaxed on the beach. Danton sat apart from them, trying to think his situation through. He was deep in thought when Anita came to him with a canteen of water.

"Do *you* think I'm a native?" he asked.

She sat down beside him and said, "I really don't see what else you could be. Everyone knows how fast a ship can travel and—"

"Times have changed since your people left Earth. They weren't in space all that time, were they?"

"Of course not. The Hutter ship went to H'gastro I, but it wasn't fertile enough, so the next generation moved to Ktedi. But the corn mutated and almost wiped them out, so they went to Lan II. They thought that would be a permanent home."

"What happened?"

"The natives," said Anita sadly. "I guess they were friendly enough, at first, and everyone thought the situation was well in hand. Then, one day, we were at war with the entire native population. They only had spears and things, but there were too many of them, so the ship left again and we came here."

"Hmm," Danton said. "I see why you're so nervous about aboriginals."

"Well, of course. While there's any possibility of danger, we're under military rule. That means my father and Jedekiah. But as soon as the emergency is past, our regular Hutter government takes over."

"Who runs that?"

"A council of Elders," Anita said, "men of good-will, who detest violence. If you and your people are really peaceable—"

"I haven't any people," Danton said wearily.

"—then you'll have every opportunity to prosper under the rule of the Elders," she finished.

They sat together and watched the sunset. Danton noticed how the wind stirred her hair, blowing it silkily across her forehead, and how the afterglow of the sun outlined and illuminated the line of her cheek and lip. He shivered and told himself it was the sudden chill of evening. And Anita, who had been talking animatedly about her childhood, found difficulty in completing her sentences, or even keeping her train of thought.

After a while, their hands strayed together. Their fingertips touched and clung. For a long time, they said nothing at all. And at last, gently and lingeringly, they kissed.

"What the hell is going on here?" a loud voice demanded.

Danton looked up and saw a burly man standing over him, his powerful head silhouetted black against the moon, his fists on his hips.

"Please, Jedekiah," Anita said. "Don't make a scene."

"Get up," Jedekiah ordered Danton, in an ominously quiet voice. "Get up on your feet."

Danton stood up, his hands half-clenched into fists, waiting.

"You," Jedekiah said to Anita, "are a disgrace to your race and to the whole Hutter people. Are you crazy? You can't mess around with a dirty native and still keep any self-respect." He turned to Danton. "And you gotta learn something and learn it good. *Natives don't fool with Hutter women!* I'm going to impress that little lesson on you right here and now."

There was a brief scuffle and Jedekiah found himself sprawled on his back.

"*Hurry!*" Jedekiah shouted. "*The natives are revolting!*"

An alarm bell from the spaceship began to peal. Sirens wailed in the night. The women and children, long trained for such an emergency, trooped back into the spaceship. The men were issued

rifles, machine guns, and hand grenades, and began to advance on Danton.

"It's just man to man," Danton called out. "We had a disagreement, that's all. There's no natives or anything. Just me."

The foremost Hutter commanded, "Anita, quick, get back!"

"I didn't see any natives," the girl said staunchly. "And it wasn't really Danta's fault—"

"*Get back!*"

She was pulled out of the way. Danton dived into the bushes before the machine guns opened up.

He crawled on all fours for fifty yards, then broke into a dead run.

Fortunately, the Hutters were not pursuing. They were interested only in guarding their ship and holding their beachhead and a narrow stretch of jungle. Danton heard gunfire throughout the night and loud shouts and frantic cries.

"There goes one!"

"Quick, turn the machine gun! They're behind us!"

"There! There! I got one!"

"No, he got away There he goes ... But look, up in the tree!"

"Fire, man, fire!"

All night, Danton listened as the Hutters repulsed the attacks of imaginary savages.

Toward dawn, the firing subsided. Danton estimated that a ton of lead had been expended, hundreds of trees decapitated, acres of grass trampled into mud. The jungle stank of cordite.

He fell into a fitful slumber.

At midday, he awakened and heard someone moving through the underbrush. He retreated into the jungle and made a meal for himself out of a local variety of bananas and mangoes. Then he decided to think things over.

But no thoughts came. His mind was filled with Anita and with grief over her loss.

All that day, he wandered disconsolately through the jungle, and in the late afternoon heard again the sound of someone moving through the underbrush.

He turned to go deeper into the island. Then he heard someone calling his name.

"Danta! Danta! Wait!"

It was Anita. Danton hesitated, not sure what to do. She might have decided to leave her people, to live in the green jungle with him. But more realistically, she might have been sent out as a decoy, leading a party of men to destroy him. How could he know where her loyalties lay?

"Danta! Where are you?"

Danton reminded himself that there could never be anything between them. Her people had shown what they thought of natives. They would always distrust him, forever try to kill him ...

"*Please*, Danta!"

Danton shrugged his shoulders and walked toward her voice.

They met in a little clearing. Anita's hair was disheveled and her khakis were torn by the jungle briars, but for Danton there could never be a lovelier woman. For an instant, he believed that she had come to join him, flee with him.

Then he saw armed men fifty yards behind her.

"It's all right," Anita said. "They're not going to kill you. They just came along to guard me."

"Guard you? From *me?*" Danton laughed hollowly.

"They don't know you as I do," Anita said. "At the Council meeting today, I told them the truth."

"You did?"

"Of course. That fight wasn't your fault, and I told everybody so. I told them you fought only to defend yourself. And Jedekiah lied. No pack of natives attacked him. There was only you, and I told them this."

"Good girl," Danton said fervently. "Did they believe you?"

"I think so. I explained that the native attack came later."

Danton groaned. "Look, how could there be a native attack when there aren't any natives?"

"But there are," Anita said. "I heard them shouting."

"Those were your own people." Danton tried to think of something that would convince her. If he couldn't convince this one girl, how could he possibly convince the rest of the Hutters?

And then he had it. It was a very simple proof, but its effect would have to be overwhelming.

"You actually believe there was a full-scale native attack," Danton stated.

"Of course."

"How many natives?"

"I heard you outnumbered us by at least ten to one."

"And we were armed?"

"You certainly were."

"Then how," Danton asked triumphantly, "do you account for the fact that *not a single Hutter was wounded!*"

She stared at him wide-eyed. "But, Danta dear, many of the Hutters were wounded, some seriously. It's a wonder no one was killed in all that fighting!"

Danton felt as though the ground had been kicked out from under him. For a terrifying minute, he believed her. The Hutters were so certain! Perhaps he did have a tribe, after all, hundreds of bronzed savages like himself, hidden in the jungle, waiting ...

"That trader who taught you English," Anita said, "must have been a very unscrupulous character. It's against interstellar law, you know, to sell firearms to natives. Someday he'll be caught and—"

"Firearms?"

"Certainly. You couldn't use them very accurately, of course. But Simeon said that sheer firepower—"

"I suppose all your casualties were from gunshot wounds."

"Yes. The men didn't let you get close enough to use knives and spears."

"I see," Danton said. His proof was utterly demolished. But he felt enormously relieved at having regained his sanity. The disorganized Hutter soldiery had ranged around the jungle, firing at everything that moved—each other. Of course they had gotten into trouble. It was more than a wonder that some of them hadn't been killed. It was a miracle.

"But I explained that they couldn't blame you," said Anita. "You were attacked first, and your own people must have thought you were in danger. The Elders thought this was probable."

"Nice of them," Danton said.

"They want to be reasonable. After all, they realize that natives are human beings just like ourselves."

"Are you sure of that?" Danton asked, with feeble irony.

"Of course. So the Elders held a big meeting on native policy and decided it once and for all. We're setting aside a thousand acres as a reservation for you and your people. That should be plenty of room, shouldn't it? The men are putting up the boundary posts now. You'll live peacefully in your reservation and we'll live in our own part of the island."

"*What?*" Danton said.

"And to seal the pledge," Anita continued, "the Elders asked you to accept this." She handed him a roll of parchment.

"What is it?"

"It's a peace treaty, declaring the end of the Hutter–New Tahitian war, and pledging our respective peoples to eternal amity."

Numbly, Danton accepted the parchment. He saw that the men who had accompanied Anita were setting red and black striped posts into the ground. They sang as they worked, happy to have reached a solution for the native problem so quickly and easily.

"But don't you think," Danton asked, "that perhaps—ah—assimilation might be a better solution?"

"I suggested it," Anita said, blushing.

"You did? You mean that you would—"

"Of course I would," said Anita, not looking at him. "I think the amalgamation of two strong races would be a fine and wonderful thing. And, Danta, what wonderful stories and legends you could have told the children!"

"I could have showed them how to fish and hunt," Danton said, "and which plants are edible, and things like that."

"And all your colorful tribal songs and dances." Anita sighed. "It would have been wonderful. I'm sorry, Danta."

"But something must be possible! Can't I talk to the Elders? Isn't there anything I can do?"

"Nothing," Anita said. "I'd run away with you, Danta, but they'd track us down, no matter how long it took."

"They'd never find us," Danton promised.

"Perhaps. I'd be willing to take the chance."

"Darling!"

"But I can't. Your poor people, Danta! The Hutters would take hostages, kill them if I weren't returned."

"I don't have any people! I don't, damn it!"

"It's sweet of you to say that," Anita said tenderly. "But lives cannot be sacrificed just for the love of two individuals. You must tell your people not to cross the boundary lines, Danta. They'll be shot. Good-by, and remember, it is best to live in the path of peace."

She hurried away from him. Danton watched her go, angry at her noble sentiments which separated them for no reason at all, yet loving her for the love she showed his people. That his people were imaginary didn't count. It was the thought that mattered.

At last he turned and walked deep into the jungle.

He stopped by a still pool of black water, overhung with giant trees and bordered by flowering ferns, and here he tried to plan the rest of his life. Anita was gone; all commerce with human beings was gone. He didn't need any of them, he told himself. He had his reservation. He could replant his vegetable garden, carve more statues, compose more sonatas, start another journal ...

"To hell with that!" he shouted to the trees. He didn't *want* to sublimate any longer. He wanted Anita, and he wanted to live with humans. He was tired of being alone.

What could he do about it?

There didn't seem to be anything. He leaned back against a tree and stared at New Tahiti's impossibly blue sky. If only the Hutters weren't so superstitious, so afraid of natives, so ...

And then it came to him, a plan so absurd, so dangerous ...

"It's worth a try," Danton said to himself, "even if they kill me."

He trotted off toward the Hutter boundary line.

A sentry saw him as he neared the vicinity of the spaceship and leveled his rifle. Danton raised both arms.

"Don't fire! I have to speak with your leaders!"

"Get back on your reservation," the sentry warned. "Get back or I'll shoot."

"I have to speak to Simeon," Danton stated, holding his ground.

"Orders is orders," said the sentry, taking aim.

"Just a minute." Simeon stepped out of the ship, frowning deeply. "What is all this?"

"That native came back," the sentry said. "Shall I pop him, sir?"

"What do you want?" Simeon asked Danton.

"I have come here to bring you," Danton roared, "*a declaration of war!*"

That woke up the Hutter camp. In a few minutes, every man, woman, and child had gathered near the spaceship. The Elders, a council of old men distinguished by their long white beards, were standing to one side.

"You accepted the peace treaty," Simeon pointed out.

"I had a talk with the other chiefs of the island," Danton said, stepping forward. "We feel the treaty is not fair. New Tahiti is ours. It belonged to our fathers and to our fathers' fathers. Here we have raised our children, sown our corn, and reaped the breadfruit. We will not live on the reservation!"

"Oh, Danta!" Anita cried, appearing from the spaceship. "I asked you to bring peace to your people!"

"They wouldn't listen," Danton said. "All the tribes are gathering. Not only my own people, the Cynochi, but the Drovati, the Lorognasti, the Retellsmbroichi, and the Vitelli. Plus, naturally, their sub-tribes and dependencies."

"How many are you?" Simeon asked.

"Fifty or sixty thousand. Of course, we don't all have rifles. Most of us will have to rely on more primitive weapons, such as poisoned arrows and darts."

A nervous murmur arose from the crowd.

"Many of us will be killed," Danton said stonily. "We do not care. Every New Tahitian will fight like a lion. We are a thousand to your one. We have cousins on the other islands who will join us. No matter what the cost in human life and misery, we will drive you into the sea. I have spoken."

He turned and started back into the jungle, walking with stiff dignity.

"Shall I pop him now, sir?" the sentry begged.

"Put down that rifle, you fool!" Simeon snapped. "Wait, Danta! Surely we can come to terms. Bloodshed is senseless."

"I agree," Danton said soberly.

"What do you want?"

"Equal rights!"

The Elders went into an immediate conference. Simeon listened to them, then turned to Danton.

"That may be possible. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing," Danton said. "Except, naturally, an alliance between the ruling clan of the Hutters and the ruling clan of the New Tahitians, to seal the bargain. Marriage would be best."

After going into conference again, the Elders gave their instructions to Simeon. The military chief was obviously disturbed. The cords stood out on his neck, but with an effort he controlled himself, bowed his agreement to the Elders, and marched up to Danton.

"The Elders have authorized me," he said, "to offer you an alliance of blood brotherhood. You and I, representing the leading clans of our peoples, will mingle our blood together in a beautiful and highly symbolic ceremony, then break bread, take salt—"

"Sorry," Danton said. "We New Tahitians don't hold with that sort of thing. It has to be marriage."

"But damn it all, man—"

"That is my last word."

"We'll never accept! Never!"

"Then it's war," Danton declared and walked into the jungle.

He was in a mood for making war. But how, he asked himself, does a single native fight against a spaceship full of armed men?

He was brooding on this when Simeon and Anita came to him through the jungle.

"All right," Simeon said angrily. "The Elders have decided. We Hutters are sick of running from planet to planet. We've had this problem before, and I suppose we'd just go somewhere else and have it again. We're sick and tired of the whole native problem, so I guess—" he gulped hard, but manfully finished the sentence—"we'd better assimilate. At least, that's what the Elders think. Personally, I'd rather fight."

"You'd lose," Danton assured him, and at that moment he felt he could take on the Hutters single-handed and win.

"Maybe so," Simeon admitted. "Anyhow, you can thank Anita for making the peace possible."

"Anita? Why?"

"Why, man, she's the only girl in the camp who'd marry a naked, dirty, heathen savage!"

And so they were married, and Danta, now known as the White Man's Friend, settled down to help the Hutters conquer their new land. They, in turn, introduced him to the marvels of civilization. He was taught Twelve-hand Bridge and Mass Dancing. And soon the Hutters built their first Subway—for a civilized people must release their aggressions—and that game was shown to Danta, too.

He tried to master the spirit of the classic Earth pastime, but it was obviously beyond the comprehension of his savage soul. Civilization stifled him, so Danta and his wife moved across the planet, always following the frontier, staying far from the amenities of civilization.

Anthropologists frequently came to visit him. They recorded all the stories he told his children, the ancient and beautiful legends of New Tahiti—tales of sky gods and water demons, fire sprites and woodland nymphs, and how Katamandura was ordered to create the world out of nothingness in just three days, and what his reward for this was, and what Jevasi said to Hootmenlati when they met in the underworld, and the strange outcome of this meeting.

The anthropologists noted similarities between these legends and certain legends of Earth, and several interesting theories were put forth. And they were interested in the great sandstone statues on the main island of New Tahiti, weird and haunting works which no viewer could forget, clearly the work of a pre–New Tahitian race, of whom no trace could ever be found.

But most fascinating of all for the scientific workers was the problem of the New Tahitians themselves. Those happy, laughing, bronzed savages, bigger, stronger, handsomer, and healthier than any other race, had melted away at the coming of the white man. Only a few of the older Hutters could remember having met them in any numbers, and their tales were considered none too reliable.

"My people?" Danta would say, when questioned. "Ah, they could not stand the white man's diseases, the white man's mechanical civilization, the white man's harsh and repressive ways. They are in a happier place now, in Valhoola beyond the sky. And someday I shall go there, too."

And white men, hearing this, experienced strangely guilty feelings and redoubled their efforts to

show kindness to Danta, the Last Native.

PILGRIMAGE TO EARTH

ALFRED Simon was born on Kazanga IV, a small agricultural planet near Arcturus, and there he drove a combine through the wheat fields, and in the long, hushed evenings listened to the recorded love songs of Earth.

Life was pleasant enough on Kazanga, and the girls were buxom, jolly, frank, and acquiescent, good companions for a hike through the hills or a swim in the brook, staunch mates for life. But romantic—never! There was good fun to be had on Kazanga, in a cheerful open manner. But there was no more than fun.

Simon felt that something was missing in this bland existence. One day, he discovered what it was.

A vendor came to Kazanga in a battered spaceship loaded with books. He was gaunt, white-haired, and a little mad. A celebration was held for him, for novelty was appreciated on the outer worlds.

The vendor told them all the latest gossip; of the price war between Detroit II and III, and how fishing fared on Alana, and what the president's wife on Moracia wore, and how oddly the men of Doran V talked. And at last someone said, "Tell us of Earth."

"Ah!" said the vendor, raising his eyebrows. "You want to hear of the mother planet? Well, friends, there's no place like old Earth, no place at all. On Earth, friends, everything is possible, and nothing is denied."

"Nothing?" Simon asked.

"They've got a law against denial," the vendor explained, grinning. "No one has ever been known to break it. Earth is different, friends. You folks specialize in farming? Well, Earth specializes in impracticalities such as madness, beauty, war, intoxication, purity, horror, and the like, and people come from light-years away to sample these wares."

"And love?" a woman asked.

"Why, girl," the vendor said gently, "Earth is the only place in the galaxy that still has love! Detroit II and III tried it and found it too expensive, you know, and Alana decided it was unsettling, and there was no time to import it on Moracia or Doran V. But as I said, Earth specializes in the impractical, and makes it pay."

"Pay?" a bulky farmer asked.

"Of course! Earth is old, her minerals are gone, and her fields are barren. Her colonies are independent now, and filled with sober folk such as yourselves, who want value for their goods. So what else can old Earth deal in, except the nonessentials that make life worth living?"

"Were you in love on Earth?" Simon asked.

"That I was," the vendor answered, with a certain grimness. "I was in love, and now I travel. Friends, these books ..."

For an exorbitant price, Simon bought an ancient poetry book, and reading, dreamed of passion beneath the lunatic moon, of dawn glimmering whitely upon lovers' parched lips, of locked bodies on a dark sea-beach, desperate with love and deafened by the booming surf.

And only on Earth was this possible! For, as the vendor told, Earth's scattered children were too hard at work wrestling a living from alien soil. The wheat and corn grew on Kazanga, and the factories increased on Detroit II and III. The fisheries of Alana were the talk of the Southern star belt,

and there were dangerous beasts on Moracia, and a whole wilderness to be won on Doran V. And this was well, and exactly as it should be.

But the new worlds were austere, carefully planned, sterile in their perfections. Something had been lost in the dead reaches of space, and only Earth knew love.

Therefore, Simon worked and saved and dreamed. And in his twenty-ninth year he sold his farm, packed all his clean shirts into a serviceable handbag, put on his best suit and a pair of stout walking shoes, and boarded the Kazanga-Metropole Flyer.

At last he came to Earth, where dreams must come true, for there is a law against their failure.

He passed quickly through Customs at Spaceport New York, and was shuttled underground to Times Square. There he emerged blinking into daylight, tightly clutching his handbag, for he had been warned about pickpockets, cutpurses, and other denizens of the city.

Breathless with wonder, he looked around.

The first thing that struck him was the endless array of theatres, with attractions in two dimensions, three or four, depending upon your preference. And what attractions!

To the right of him a beetling marquee proclaimed: LUST ON VENUS! A DOCUMENTARY ACCOUNT OF SEX PRACTICES AMONG THE INHABITANTS OF THE GREEN HELL! SHOCKING! REVEALING!

He wanted to go in. But across the street was a war film. The billboard shouted, THE SUN BUSTERS! DEDICATED TO THE DARE-DEVILS OF THE SPACE MARINES! And further down was a picture called TARZAN BATTLES THE SATURNIAN GHOULS!

Tarzan, he recalled from his reading, was an ancient ethnic hero of Earth.

It was all wonderful, but there was so much more! He saw little open shops where one could buy food of all worlds, and especially such native Terran dishes as pizza, hot dogs, spaghetti, and knishes. And there were stores which sold surplus clothing from the Terran spacefleets, and other stores which sold nothing but beverages.

Simon didn't know what to do first. Then he heard a staccato burst of gunfire behind him, and whirled.

It was only a shooting gallery, a long, narrow, brightly painted place with a waist-high counter. The manager, a swarthy fat man with a mole on his chin, sat on a high stool and smiled at Simon.

"Try your luck?"

Simon walked over and saw that, instead of the usual targets, there were four scantily dressed women at the end of the gallery, seated upon bullet-scored chairs. They had tiny bulls'-eyes painted on their foreheads and above each breast.

"But do you fire real bullets?" Simon asked.

"Of course!" the manager said. "There's a law against false advertising on Earth. Real bullets and real gals! Step up and knock one off!"

One of the women called out, "Come on, sport! Bet you miss me!"

Another screamed, "He couldn't hit the broad side of a spaceship!"

"Sure he can!" another shouted. "Come on, sport!"

Simon rubbed his forehead and tried not to act surprised. After all, this was Earth, where anything was allowed as long as it was commercially feasible.

He asked, "Are there galleries where you shoot men, too?"

"Of course," the manager said. "But you ain't no pervert, are you?"

"Certainly not!"

"You an outworlder?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"The suit. Always tell by the suit." The fat man closed his eyes and chanted, "Step up, step up and kill a woman! Get rid of a load of repressions! Squeeze the trigger and feel the old anger ooze out of you! Better than a massage! Better than getting drunk! Step up, step up and kill a woman!"

Simon asked one of the girls, "Do you stay dead when they kill you?"

"Don't be stupid," the girl said.

"But the shock—"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I could do worse."

Simon was about to ask how she could do worse, when the manager leaned over the counter, speaking confidentially.

"Look, buddy. Look what I got here."

Simon glanced over the counter and saw a compact submachine gun.

"For a ridiculously low price," the manager said, "I'll let you use the tommy. You can spray the whole place, shoot down the fixtures, rip up the walls. This drives a .45 slug, buddy, and it kicks like a mule. You really know you're firing when you fire the tommy."

"I am not interested," Simon said sternly.

"I've got a grenade or two," the manager said. "Fragmentation, of course. You could really—"

"No!"

"For a price," the manager said, "you can shoot me, too, if that's how your tastes run, although I wouldn't have guessed it. What do you say?"

"No! Never! This is horrible!"

The manager looked at him blankly. "Not in the mood now? OK. I'm open twenty-four hours a day. See you later, sport."

"Never!" Simon said, walking away.

"Be expecting you, lover!" one of the women called after him.

Simon went to a refreshment stand and ordered a small glass of cola-cola. He found that his hands were shaking. With an effort he steadied them, and sipped his drink. He reminded himself that he must not judge Earth by his own standards. If people on Earth enjoyed killing people, and the victims didn't mind being killed, why should anyone object?

Or should they?

He was pondering this when a voice at his elbow said, "Hey, bub."

Simon turned and saw a wizened, furtive-faced little man in an oversize raincoat standing beside him.

"Out-of-towner?" the little man asked.

"I am," Simon said. "How did you know?"

"The shoes. I always look at the shoes. How do you like our little planet?"

"It's—confusing," Simon said carefully. "I mean I didn't expect—well—"

"Of course," the little man said. "You're an idealist. One look at your honest face tells me that, my friend. You've come to Earth for a definite purpose. Am I right?"

Simon nodded. The little man said, "I know your purpose, my friend. You're looking for a war that will make the world safe for something, and you've come to the right place. We have six major wars running at all times, and there's never any waiting for an important position in any of them."

"Sorry, but—"

"Right at this moment," the little man said impressively, "the downtrodden workers of Peru are engaged in a desperate struggle against a corrupt and decadent monarchy. One more man could swing the contest! You, my friend, could be that man! You could guarantee the socialist victory!"

Observing the expression on Simon's face, the little man said quickly, "But there's a lot to be said for an enlightened aristocracy. The wise old king of Peru (a philosopher-king in the deepest Platonic sense of the word) sorely needs your help. His tiny corps of scientists, humanitarians, Swiss guards, knights of the realm, and royal peasants is sorely pressed by the foreign-inspired socialist conspiracy. A single man, now—"

"I'm not interested," Simon said.

"In China, the Anarchists—"

"No."

"Perhaps you'd prefer the Communists in Wales? Or the Capitalists in Japan? Or if your affinities lie with a splinter group such as Feminists, Prohibitionists, Free Silverists, or the like, we could probably arrange—"

"I don't want a war," Simon said.

"Who could blame you?" the little man said, nodding rapidly. "War is hell. In that case, you've come to Earth for love."

"How did you know?" Simon asked.

The little man smiled modestly. "Love and war," he said, "are Earth's two staple commodities. We've been turning them both out in bumper crops since the beginning of time."

"Is love very difficult to find," Simon asked.

"Walk uptown two blocks," the little man said briskly. "Can't miss it. Tell 'em Joe sent you."

"But that's impossible! You can't just walk out and—"

"What do you know about love?" Joe asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, we're experts on it."

"I know what the books say," Simon said. "Passion beneath the lunatic moon—"

"Sure, and bodies on a dark sea-beach desperate with love and deafened by the booming surf."

"You've read that book?"

"It's the standard advertising brochure. I must be going. Two blocks uptown. Can't miss it."

And with a pleasant nod, Joe moved into the crowd.

Simon finished his cola-cola and walked slowly up Broadway, his brow knotted in thought, but determined not to form any premature judgments.

When he reached 44th Street he saw a tremendous neon sign flashing brightly. It said, LOVE, INC.

Smaller neon letters read, *Open 24 Hours a Day!*

Beneath that it read, *Up One Flight.*

Simon frowned, for a terrible suspicion had just crossed his mind. Still, he climbed the stairs and entered a small, tastefully furnished reception room. From there he was sent down a long corridor to a numbered room.

Within the room was a handsome gray-haired man who rose from behind an impressive desk and shook his hand, saying, "Well! How are things on Kazanga?"

"How did you know I was from Kazanga?"

"That shirt. I always look at the shirt. I'm Mr. Tate, and I'm here to serve you to the best of my ability. You are—"

"Simon, Alfred Simon."

"Please be seated, Mr. Simon. Cigarette? Drink? You won't regret coming to us, sir. We're the oldest love-dispensing firm in the business, and much larger than our closest competitor, Passion Unlimited. Moreover, our fees are far more reasonable and bring you an improved product. Might I ask how you heard of us? Did you see our full page ad in the *Times?* Or—"

"Joe sent me," Simon said.

"Ah, he's an active one," Mr. Tate said, shaking his head playfully. "Well sir, there's no reason to delay. You've come a long way for love, and love you shall have." He reached for a button on his desk, but Simon stopped him.

Simon said, "I don't want to be rude or anything, but ..."

"Yes?" Mr. Tate said, with an encouraging smile.

"I don't understand this," Simon blurted out, flushing deeply, beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead. "I think I'm in the wrong place. I didn't come all the way to Earth just for ... I mean, you can't really sell *love*, can you? Not *love!* I mean, then it isn't really *love*, is it?"

"But of course!" Mr. Tate said, half rising from his chair in astonishment. "That's the whole point! Anyone can buy sex. Good lord, it's the cheapest thing in the universe, next to human life. But *love* is rare, *love* is special, *love* is found only on Earth. Have you read our brochure?"

"Bodies on a dark sea-beach?" Simon asked.

"Yes, that one. I wrote it. Gives something of the feeling, doesn't it? You can't get that feeling from just *anyone*, Mr. Simon. You can get that feeling only from someone who loves you."

Simon said dubiously, "It's not genuine love though, is it?"

"Of course it is! If we were selling simulated love, we'd label it as such. The advertising laws on Earth are strict, I can assure you. Anything can be sold, but it must be labelled properly. That's ethics, Mr. Simon!"

Tate caught his breath and continued in a calmer tone. "No, sir, make no mistake. Our product is not a substitute. It is the exact self-same feeling that poets and writers have raved about for thousands of years. Through the wonders of modern science we can bring this feeling to you at your convenience, attractively packaged, completely disposable, and for a ridiculously low price."

Simon said, "I pictured something more—spontaneous."

"Spontaneity has its charm," Mr. Tate agreed. "Our research labs are working on it. Believe me, there's nothing science can't produce, as long as there's a market for it."

"I don't like any of this," Simon said, getting to his feet. "I think I'll just go see a movie."

"Wait!" Mr. Tate cried. "You think we're trying to put something over on you. You think we'll introduce you to a girl who will act as though she loved you, but who in reality will not. Is that it?"

"I guess so," Simon said.

"But it just isn't so! It would be too costly for one thing. For another, the wear and tear on the girl would be tremendous. And it would be psychologically unsound for her to attempt living a lie of such depth and scope."

"Then how do you do it?"

"By utilizing our understanding of science and the human mind."

To Simon, this sounded like double-talk. He moved toward the door.

"Tell me something," Mr. Tate said. "You're a bright looking young fellow. Don't you think you could tell real love from a counterfeit item?"

"Certainly."

"There's your safeguard! You must be satisfied, or don't pay us a cent."

"I'll think about it," Simon said.

"Why delay? Leading psychologists say that real love is a fortifier and a restorer of sanity, a balm for damaged egoes, a restorer of hormone balance, and an improver of the complexion. The love we supply you has everything: deep and abiding affection, unrestrained passion, complete faithfulness, an almost mystic affection for your defects as well as your virtues, a pitiful desire to please, and, as a plus that only Love, Inc., can supply: that uncontrollable first spark, that blinding moment of love at first sight!"

Mr. Tate pressed a button. Simon frowned undecisively. The door opened, a girl stepped in, and Simon stopped thinking.

She was tall and slender, and her hair was brown with a sheen of red. Simon could have told you nothing about her face, except that it brought tears to his eyes. And if you asked him about her figure, he might have killed you.

"Miss Penny Bright," said Tate, "meet Mr. Alfred Simon."

The girl tried to speak but no words came, and Simon was equally dumbstruck. He looked at her and knew. Nothing else mattered. To the depths of his heart he knew that he was truly and completely loved.

They left at once, hand in hand, and were taken by jet to a small white cottage in a pine grove, overlooking the sea, and there they talked and laughed and loved, and later Simon saw his beloved wrapped in the sunset flame like a goddess of fire. And in blue twilight she looked at him with eyes enormous and dark, her known body mysterious again. The moon came up, bright and lunatic, changing flesh to shadow, and she wept and beat his chest with her small fists, and Simon wept, too, although he did not know why. And at last dawn came, faint and disturbed, glimmering upon their parched lips and locked bodies, and nearby the booming surf deafened, inflamed, and maddened them.

At noon they were back in the offices of Love, Inc. Penny clutched his hand for a moment, then disappeared through an inner door.

"Was it real love?" Mr. Tate asked.

"Yes!"

"And was everything satisfactory?"

"Yes! It was love, it was the real thing! But why did she insist on returning?"

"Posthypnotic command," Mr. Tate said.

"What?"

"What did you expect? Everyone wants love, but few wish to pay for it. Here is your bill, sir."

Simon paid, fuming. "This wasn't necessary," he said. "Of course I would pay you for bringing us together. Where is she now? What have you done with her?"

"Please," Mr. Tate said soothingly. "Try to calm yourself."

"I don't want to be calm!" Simon shouted. "I want Penny!"

"That will be impossible," Mr. Tate said, with the barest hint of frost in his voice. "Kindly stop making a spectacle of yourself."

"Are you trying to get more money out of me?" Simon shrieked. "All right, I'll pay. How much do I have to pay to get her out of your clutches?" And Simon yanked out his wallet and slammed it on the desk.

Mr. Tate poked the wallet with a stiffened forefinger. "Put that back in your pocket," he said. "We are an old and respectable firm. If you raise your voice again, I shall be forced to have you ejected."

Simon calmed himself with an effort, put the wallet back in his pocket, and sat down. He took a

deep breath and said, very quietly, "I'm sorry."

"That's better," Mr. Tate said. "I will not be shouted at. However, if you are reasonable, I can be reasonable, too. Now, what's the trouble?"

"The trouble?" Simon's voice started to lift. He controlled it and said, "She loves me."

"Of course."

"Then how can you separate us?"

"What has the one thing got to do with the other?" Mr. Tate asked. "Love is a delightful interlude, a relaxation, good for the intellect, for the ego, for the hormone balance, and for the skin tone. But one would hardly wish to continue loving, would one?"

"I would," Simon said. "This love was special, unique—"

"They all are," Mr. Tate said. "But as you know, they are all produced in the same way."

"What?"

"Surely you know something about the mechanics of love production?"

"No," Simon said. "I thought it was—natural."

Mr. Tate shook his head. "We gave up natural selection centuries ago, shortly after the Mechanical Revolution. It was too slow, and commercially unfeasible. Why bother with it, when we can produce any feeling at will by conditioning and proper stimulation of certain brain centers? The result? Penny, completely in love with you! Your own bias, which we calculated, in favor of her particular somatotype, made it complete. We always throw in the dark sea-beach, the lunatic moon, the pallid dawn—"

"Then she could have been made to love anyone," Simon said slowly.

"Could have been brought to love anyone," Mr. Tate corrected.

"Oh, lord, how did she get into this horrible work?" Simon asked.

"She came in and signed a contract in the usual way," Tate said. "It pays very well. And at the termination of the lease, we return her original personality—untouched! But why do you call the work horrible? There's nothing reprehensible about love."

"It wasn't love!" Simon cried.

"But it was! The genuine article! Unbiased scientific firms have made qualitative tests of it, in comparison with the natural thing. In every case, our love tested out to more depth, passion, fervor, and scope."

Simon shut his eyes tightly, opened them, and said, "Listen to me. I don't care about your scientific tests. I love her, she loves me, that's all that counts. Let me speak to her! I want to marry her!"

Mr. Tate wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Come, come, man! You wouldn't want to marry a girl like that! But if it's marriage you're after, we deal in that, too. I can arrange an idyllic and nearly spontaneous love-match for you with a guaranteed government-inspected virgin—"

"No! I love Penny! At least let me speak to her!"

"That will be quite impossible," Mr. Tate said.

"Why?"

Mr. Tate pushed a button on his desk. "Why do you think? We've wiped out the previous indoctrination. Penny is now in love with someone else."

And then Simon understood. He had realized that even now Penny was looking at another man with that passion he had known, feeling for another man that complete and bottomless love that unbiased scientific firms had shown to be so much greater than the old-fashioned, commercially unfeasible natural selection, and that upon that same dark sea-beach mentioned in the advertising

brochure—

He lunged for Tate's throat. Two attendants, who had entered the office a few moments earlier, caught him and led him to the door.

"Remember!" Tate called. "This in no way invalidates your own experience."

Hellishly enough, Simon knew that what Tate said was true.

And then he found himself on the street.

At first, all he desired was to escape from Earth, where the commercial impracticalities were more than a normal man could afford. He walked very quickly, and his Penny walked beside him, her face glorified with love for him, and him, and him, and you, and you.

And of course he came to the shooting gallery.

"Try your luck?" the manager asked.

"Set 'em up," said Alfred Simon.

A WIND IS RISING

OUTSIDE, a wind was rising. But within the station, the two men had other things on their minds. Clayton turned the handle of the water faucet again and waited. Nothing happened.

"Try hitting it," said Nerishev.

Clayton pounded the faucet with his fist. Two drops of water came out. A third drop trembled on the spigot's lip, swayed, and fell. That was all.

"That does it," Clayton said bitterly. "That damned water pipe is blocked again. How much water we got in storage?"

"Four gallons—assuming the tank hasn't sprung another leak," said Nerishev. He stared at the faucet, tapping it with long, nervous fingers. He was a big, pale man with a sparse beard, fragile-looking in spite of his size. He didn't look like the type to operate an observation station on a remote and alien planet. But the Advance Exploration Corps had discovered, to its regret, that there was no type to operate a station.

Nerishev was a competent biologist and botanist. Although chronically nervous, he had surprising reserves of calm. He was the sort of man who needs an occasion to rise to. This, if anything, made him suitable to pioneer a planet like Carella I.

"I suppose somebody should go out and unblock the water pipe," said Nerishev, not looking at Clayton.

"I suppose so," Clayton said, pounding the faucet again. "But it's going to be murder out there. Listen to it!"

Clayton was a short man, bull-necked, red-faced, powerfully constructed. This was his third tour of duty as a planetary observer.

He had tried other jobs in the Advance Exploration Corps, but none suited him. PEP—Primary Extraterrestrial Penetration—faced him with too many unpleasant surprises. It was work for daredevils and madmen. But Base Operations was much too tame and restricting.

He liked the work of a planetary observer, though. His job was to sit tight on a planet newly opened by the PEP boys and checked out by a drone camera crew. All he had to do on this planet was stoically endure discomfort and skillfully keep himself alive. After a year of this, the relief ship would remove him and note his report. On the basis of the report, further action would or would not be taken.

Before each tour of duty, Clayton dutifully promised his wife that this would be the last. After *this* tour, he was going to stay on Earth and work on the little farm he owned. He promised ...

But at the end of each rest leave, Clayton journeyed out again, to do the thing for which he was best suited: staying alive through skill and endurance.

But this time, he had had it. He and Nerishev had been eight months on Carella. The relief ship was due in another four months. If he came through alive, he was going to quit for good.

"Just listen to that wind," Nerishev said.

Muffled, distant, it sighed and murmured around the steel hull of the station like a zephyr, a summer breeze.

That was how it sounded to them inside the station, separated from the wind by three inches of steel plus a soundproofing layer.

"It's rising," Clayton said. He walked over to the wind-speed indicator. According to the dial, the

gentle-sounding wind was blowing at a steady 82 miles an hour—

A light breeze on Carella.

"Man, oh, man!" Clayton said. "I don't want to go out there. Nothing's worth going out there."

"It's your turn," Nerishev pointed out.

"I know. Let me complain a little first, will you? Come on, let's get a forecast from Smanik."

They walked the length of the station, their heels echoing on the steel floor, past compartments filled with food, air supplies, instruments, extra equipment. At the far end of the station was the heavy metal door of the receiving shed. The men slipped on air masks and adjusted the flow.

"Ready?" Clayton asked.

"Ready."

They braced themselves, gripping handholds beside the door. Clayton touched the stud. The door slid away and a gust of wind shrieked in. The men lowered their heads and butted into the wind, entering the receiving shed.

The shed was an extension of the station, some thirty feet long by fifteen feet wide. It was not sealed, like the rest of the structure. The walls were built of openwork steel, with baffles set in. The wind could pass through this arrangement, but slowed down, controlled. A gauge told them it was blowing 34 miles an hour within the shed.

It was a damned nuisance, Clayton thought, having to confer with the natives of Carella in a 34-mile gale. But there was no other way. The Carellans, raised on a planet where the wind never blew less than 70 miles an hour, couldn't stand the "dead air" within the station. Even with the oxygen content cut down to the Carellan norm, the natives couldn't make the adjustment. Within the station, they grew dizzy and apprehensive. Soon they began strangling, like a man in a vacuum.

Thirty-four miles an hour of wind was a fair compromise-point for human and Carellan to meet.

Clayton and Nerishev walked down the shed. In one corner lay what looked like a tangle of dried-out octopi. The tangle stirred and waved two tentacles ceremoniously.

"Good day," said Smanik.

"Good day," Clayton said. "What do you think of the weather?"

"Excellent," said Smanik.

Nerishev tugged at Clayton's sleeve. "What did he say?" he asked, and nodded thoughtfully when Clayton translated it for him. Nerishev lacked Clayton's gift for language. Even after eight months, the Carellan tongue was still an undecipherable series of clicks and whistles to him.

Several more Carellans came up to join the conversation. They all looked like spiders or octopi, with their small centralized body and long, flexible tentacles. This was the optimum survival shape on Carella, and Clayton frequently envied it. He was forced to rely absolutely on the shelter of the station; but the Carellans lived directly in their environment.

Often he had seen a native walking against a tornado-force wind, seven or eight limbs hooked into the ground and pulling, other tentacles reaching out for further grips. He had seen them rolling down the wind like tumbleweed, their tentacles curled around them, wickerwork-basket fashion. He thought of the gay and audacious way they handled their land ships, scudding merrily along on the wind....

Well, he thought, they'd look damned silly on Earth.

"What is the weather going to be like?" he asked Smanik.

The Carellan pondered the question for a while, sniffed the wind, and rubbed two tentacles together.

"The wind may rise a shade more," he said finally. "But it will be nothing serious."

Clayton wondered. *Nothing serious* for a Carellan could mean disaster for an Earthman. Still, it sounded fairly promising.

He and Nerishev left the receiving shed and closed the door.

"Look," said Nerishev, "if you'd like to wait—"

"Might as well get it over with," Clayton said.

Here, lighted by a single dim overhead bulb, was the smooth, glittering bulk of the Brute. That was the nickname they had given to the vehicle specially constructed for transportation on Carella.

The Brute was armored like a tank and streamlined like a spheric section. It had vision slits of shatterproof glass, thick enough to match the strength of its steel plating. Its center of gravity was low; most of its twelve tons were centered near the ground. The Brute was sealed. Its heavy diesel engine, as well as all necessary openings, were fitted with special dustproof covers. The Brute rested on its six fat tires, looking, in its immovable bulk, like some prehistoric monster.

Clayton got in, put on crash helmet and goggles, and strapped himself into the padded seat. He revved up the engine, listened to it critically, then nodded.

"Okay," he said, "the Brute's ready. Get upstairs and open the garage door."

"Good luck," said Nerishev. He left.

Clayton went over the instrument panel, making sure that all the Brute's special gadgets were in working order. In a moment, he heard Nerishev's voice coming in over the radio.

"I'm opening the door."

"Right."

The heavy door slid back and Clayton drove the Brute outside.

The station had been set up on a wide, empty plain. Mountains would have offered some protection from the wind; but the mountains on Carella were in a constant restless state of building up and breaking down. The plain presented dangers of its own, however. To avert the worst of those dangers, a field of stout steel posts had been planted around the station. The closely packed posts pointed outward, like ancient tank traps, and served the same purpose.

Clayton drove the Brute down one of the narrow, winding channels that led through the field of posts. He emerged, located the pipeline, and started along it. On a small screen above his head, a white line flashed into view. The line would show any break or obstruction in the pipeline.

A wide, rocky, monotonous desert stretched before him. An occasional low bush came into sight. The wind was directly behind him, blanketed by the sound of the diesel.

He glanced at the wind-speed indicator. The wind of Carella was blowing at 92 miles an hour.

He drove steadily along, humming to himself under his breath. From time to time, he heard a crash. Pebbles, propelled by the hurricane wind, were cannonading against the Brute. They shattered harmlessly against the thick armor.

"Everything all right?" Nerishev asked over the radio.

"Fine," Clayton said.

In the distance, he saw a Carellan land ship. It was about forty feet long, he judged, and narrow in the beam, skimming rapidly on crude wooden rollers. The ship's sails were made from one of the few leaf-bearing shrubs on the planet.

The Carellans waved their tentacles as they went past. They seemed to be heading toward the station.

Clayton turned his attention back to the pipeline. He was beginning to hear the wind now, above the roar of the diesel. The windspeed indicator showed that the wind had risen to 97 miles an hour.

Somberly he stared through the sand-pocked slit-window. In the far distance were jagged cliffs,

seen dimly through the dust-blown air. More pebbles ricocheted off his hull, and the sound rang hollowly through his vehicle. He glimpsed another Carellan land ship, then three more. They were tacking stubbornly into the wind.

It struck Clayton that a lot of Carellans were moving toward the station. He signaled to Nerishev on the radio.

"How are you doing?" Nerishev asked.

"I'm close to the spring and no break yet," Clayton reported. "Looks like a lot of Carellans heading your way."

"I know. Six ships are moored in the lee of the shed and more are coming."

"We've never had any trouble with the natives before," Clayton said slowly. "What does this look like?"

"They've brought food with them. It might be a celebration."

"Maybe. Watch yourself."

"Don't worry. You take care and hurry—"

"I've found the break! Speak to you later."

The break showed on the screen, glowing white. Peering out the port, Clayton saw where a boulder had rolled across the pipeline, crushing it, and rolled on.

He brought the truck to a stop on the windward side of the pipe. It was blowing 113 miles an hour. Clayton slid out of the truck, carrying several lengths of pipe, some patches, a blowtorch, and a bag of tools. They were all tied to him, and he was secured to the Brute by a strong nylon rope.

Outside, the wind was deafening. It thundered and roared like breaking surf. He adjusted his mask for more oxygen and went to work.

Two hours later, he had completed a fifteen-minute repair job. His clothing was shredded and his air extractor was completely clogged with dust.

He climbed back into the Brute, sealed the port, and lay on the floor, resting. The truck was starting to tremble in the wind gusts. Clayton ignored it.

"Hello? Hello?" Nerishev called over the radio.

Wearily, Clayton climbed back into the driver's seat and acknowledged.

"Hurry back now, Clayton! No time to rest! The wind's up to 138! I think a storm is coming!"

A storm on Carella was something Clayton didn't even want to think about. They had experienced only one in eight months. During it, the winds had gone over 160 miles an hour.

He nosed the truck around and started back, driving directly into the wind. At full throttle, he found he was making very little progress. Three miles an hour was all the heavy diesel would do against the pressure of a 138-mile wind.

He stared ahead through the slit-window. The wind, outlined by long streamers of dust and sand, seemed to be coming straight at him, funneled out of an infinitely wide sky to the tiny point of his window. Windborne rocks sailed at him, grew large, immense, and shattered against his window. He couldn't stop himself from ducking each time one came.

The heavy engine was beginning to labor and miss.

"Oh, baby," Clayton breathed, "don't quit now. Not now. Get Papa home. *Then* quit. Please!"

He figured he was about ten miles from the station, which lay directly upwind.

He heard a sound like an avalanche plummeting down a mountainside. It was made by a boulder the size of a house. Too big for the wind to lift, it was rolling at him from windward, digging a furrow in the rocky ground as it came.

Clayton twisted the steering wheel. The engine labored, and with infinite slowness the truck crept out of the boulder's path. Shaking, Clayton watched the boulder bearing down. With one hand, he pounded on the instrument panel.

"Move, baby, move!"

Booming hollowly, the boulder rolled past at a good thirty miles an hour.

"Too close," Clayton said to himself. He tried to turn the Brute back into the wind, toward the station. The Brute wouldn't do it.

The diesel labored and whined, trying to turn the big truck into the wind. And the wind, like a solid gray wall, pushed the truck away.

The windspeed indicator stood at 159 miles an hour.

"How are you doing?" Nerishev asked over the radio.

"Just great! Leave me alone, I'm busy."

Clayton set his brakes, unstrapped, and raced back to the engine. He adjusted timing and mixture, and hurried back to the controls.

"Hey, Nerishev! That engine's going to conk out!"

It was a full second before Nerishev answered. Then, very calmly, he asked, "What's wrong with it?"

"Sand!" Clayton said. "Particles driven at 159 miles an hour—sand's in the bearings, injectors, everything. I'm going to make all the distance I can."

"And then?"

"Then I'll try to sail her back," Clayton said. "I just hope the mast will take it."

He turned his attention to the controls. At wind speeds like this, the truck had to be handled like a ship at sea. Clayton picked up speed with the wind on his quarter, then came about and slammed into the wind.

The Brute made it this time and crossed over onto the other tack.

It was the best he could do, Clayton decided. His windward distance would have to be made by tacking. He edged toward the eye of the wind. But at full throttle, the diesel couldn't bring him much closer than forty degrees.

For an hour, the Brute forged ahead, tacking back and forth across the wind, covering three miles in order to make two. Miraculously, the engine kept on running. Clayton blessed the manufacturer and begged the diesel to hold out a little while longer.

Through a blinding screen of sand, he saw another Carellan land ship. It was reefed down and heeled precariously over. But it forged steadily to windward and soon outdistanced him.

Lucky natives, Clayton thought—165 miles of wind was a sailing breeze to them!

The station, a gray half-sphere, came into sight ahead.

"I'm going to make it!" Clayton shouted. "Break out the rum, Nerishev, old man! Papa's getting drunk tonight!"

The diesel chose that moment to break down for good.

Clayton swore violently as he set the brakes. What lousy luck! If the wind were behind him, he could roll in. But, of course, it had to be in front.

"What are you going to do now?" Nerishev asked.

"I'm going to sit here," Clayton said. "When the wind calms down to a hurricane, I'm going to walk home."

The Brute's twelve-ton mass was shaking and rattling in the wind blasts.

"You know," Clayton said, "I'm going to retire after this tour."

"That so? You really mean it?"

"Absolutely. I own a farm in Maryland, with frontage on Chesapeake Bay. You know what I'm going to do?"

"What?"

"I'm going to raise oysters. You see, the oyster—hold it."

The station seemed to be drifting slowly upwind, away from him. Clayton rubbed his eyes, wondering it he were going crazy. Then he realized that, in spite of its brakes, in spite of its streamlining, the truck was being pushed downwind, away from the station.

Angrily he shoved a button on his switchboard, releasing the port and starboard anchors. He heard the solid clunk of the anchors hitting the ground, heard the steel cables scrape and rattle. He let out a hundred and seventy feet of steel line, then set the winch brakes. The truck was holding again.

"I dropped the anchors," Clayton said.

"Are they holding?"

"So far." Clayton lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his padded chair. Every muscle in his body ached from tension. His eyelids were twitching from watching the wind-lines converging on him. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

The sound of the wind cut through the truck's steel plating. The wind howled and moaned, tugging at the truck, trying to find a hold on the smooth surface. At 169 miles an hour, the ventilator baffles blew out. He would be blinded, Clayton thought, if he weren't wearing sealed goggles, choked if he weren't breathing canned air. Dust swirled, thick and electric, within the Brute's cabin.

Pebbles, flung with the velocity of rifle bullets, splattered against the hull. They were striking harder now. He wondered how much more force they'd need before they started piercing the armor plating.

At times like this, Clayton found it hard to maintain a common-sense attitude. He was painfully aware of the vulnerability of human flesh, appalled at the possibilities for violence in the Universe. What was he doing out here? Man's place was in the calm, still air of Earth. If he ever got back ...

"Are you all right?" Nerishev asked.

"Making out just great," Clayton said wearily. "How are things at the station?"

"Not so good. The whole structure's starting sympathetic vibration. Enough wind for long enough and the foundations could shatter."

"And they want to put a fuel station here!" Clayton said.

"Well, you know the problem. This is the only solid planet between Angarsa III and the South Ridge Belt. All the rest are gas giants."

"They better build their station in space."

"The cost—"

"Hell, man, it'll cost less to build another planet than to try to maintain a fuel base on this one!" Clayton spat out a mouthful of dust. "I just want to get on that relief ship. How many natives at the station now?"

"About fifteen, in the shed."

"Any sign of violence?"

"No, but they're acting funny."

"How so?"

"I don't know," said Nerishev. "I just don't like it."

"Stay out of the shed, huh? You can't speak the language, anyhow, and I want you in one piece when I come back." He hesitated. "If I come back."

"You'll be fine," Nerishev said.

"Sure I will. I—oh, Lord!"

"What's it? What's wrong?"

"Boulder coming down! Talk to you later!"

Clayton turned his attention to the boulder, a rapidly growing black speck to windward. It was heading directly toward his anchored and immobilized truck. He glanced at the windspeed indicator. Impossible—174 miles an hour! And yet, he reminded himself, winds in the stratospheric jet stream on Earth blow at 200 miles an hour.

The boulder, large as a house, still growing as it approached, was rolling directly his way.

"Swerve! Turn!" Clayton bellowed at the boulder, pounding the instrument panel with his fist.

The boulder was coming at him, straight as a ruler line, rolling right down the wind.

With a yell of agony, Clayton touched a button, releasing both anchors at the cable end. There was no time to winch them in, even assuming the winch could take the strain. Still the boulder grew.

Clayton released the brakes.

The Brute, shoved by a wind of 178 miles an hour, began to pick up speed. Within seconds, he was traveling at 38 miles an hour, staring through his rear-vision mirror at the boulder overtaking him.

As the boulder rolled up, Clayton twisted the steering wheel hard to the left. The truck tilted over precariously, swerved, fishtailed on the hard ground, and tried to turn itself over. He fought the wheel, trying to bring the Brute back to equilibrium. He thought: *I'm probably the first man who ever jibed a twelve-ton truck!*

The boulder, looking like a whole city block, roared past. The heavy truck teetered for a moment, then came to rest on its six wheels.

"Clayton! What happened? Are you all right?"

"Fine," Clayton gasped. "But I had to slip the cables. I'm running downwind."

"Can you turn?"

"Almost knocked her over, trying to."

"How far can you run?"

Clayton stared ahead. In the distance, he could make out the dramatic black cliffs that rimmed the plain.

"I got about fifteen miles to go before I pile into the cliffs. Not much time, at the speed I'm traveling." He locked his brakes. The tires began to scream and the brake linings smoked furiously. But the wind, at 183 miles an hour, didn't even notice the difference. His speed over the ground had picked up to 44 miles an hour.

"Try sailing her out!" Nerishev said.

"She won't take it."

"Try, man! What else can you do? The wind's hit 185 here. The whole station's shaking! Boulders are tearing up the whole post defense. I'm afraid some boulders are going to get through and flatten —"

"Stow it," Clayton said. "I got troubles of my own."

"I don't know if the station will stand! Clayton, listen to me. Try the—"

The radio suddenly and dismayingly went dead.

Clayton banged it a few times, then gave up. His speed over the ground reached 49 miles an hour. The cliffs were already looming large before him.

"So all right," Clayton said. "Here we go." He released his last anchor, a small emergency job.

At its full length of 250 feet of steel cable, it slowed him to 30 miles an hour. The anchor was breaking and ripping through the ground like a jet-propelled plow.

Clayton then turned on the sail mechanism. This had been installed by the Earth engineers upon much the same theory that has small ocean-going motor boats carry a small mast and auxiliary sail. The sails are insurance, in case the engine fails. On Carella, a man could never walk home from a stranded vehicle. He had to come in under power.

The mast, a short, powerful steel pillar, extruded itself through a gasketed hole in the roof. Magnetic shrouds and stays snapped into place, supporting it. From the mast fluttered a sail made of link-woven metal. For a mainsheet, Clayton had a three-part flexible-steel cable, working through a winch.

The sail was only a few square feet in area. It could drive a twelve-ton monster with its brakes locked and an anchor out on 250 feet of line—

Easily—with the wind blowing 185 miles an hour.

Clayton winched in the mainsheet and turned, taking the wind on the quarter. But a quartering course wasn't good enough. He winched the sail in still more and turned further into the wind.

With the super-hurricane on his beam, the ponderous truck heeled over, lifting one entire side into the air. Quickly Clayton released a few feet of mainsheet. The metal-link sail screamed and chattered as the wind whipped it.

Driving now with just the sail's leading edge, Clayton was able to keep the truck on its feet and make good a course to windward.

Through the rear-vision mirror, he could see the black, jagged cliffs behind him. They were his lee shore, his coast of wrecks. But he was sailing out of the trap. Foot by foot, he was pulling away.

"That's my baby!" Clayton shouted to the battling Brute.

His sense of victory snapped almost at once, for he heard an ear-splitting clang and something whizzed past his head. At 187 miles an hour, pebbles were piercing his armor plating. He was undergoing the Carellan equivalent of a machine-gun barrage. The wind shrieked through the holes, trying to batter him out of his seat.

Desperately he clung to the steering wheel. He could hear the sail wrenching. It was made out of the toughest flexible alloys available, but it wasn't going to hold up for long. The short, thick mast, supported by six heavy cables, was whipping like a fishing rod.

His brake linings were worn out, and his speed over the ground came up to 57 miles an hour.

He was too tired to think. He steered, his hands locked to the wheel, his slitted eyes glaring ahead into the storm.

The sail ripped with a scream. The tatters flogged for a moment, then brought the mast down. Wind gusts were approaching 190 miles an hour.

The wind now was driving him back toward the cliffs. At 192 miles an hour of wind, the Brute was lifted bodily, thrown for a dozen yards, slammed back on its wheels. A front tire blew under the pressure, then two rear ones. Clayton put his head on his arms and waited for the end.

Suddenly, the Brute stopped short. Clayton was flung forward. His safety belt checked him for a moment, then snapped. He banged against the instrument panel and fell back, dazed and bleeding.

He lay on the floor, half conscious, trying to figure out what had happened. Slowly he pulled himself back into the seat, foggily aware that he hadn't broken any limbs. His stomach was one great bruise. His mouth was bleeding.

At last, looking through the rear-vision mirror, he saw what had happened. The emergency anchor, trailing at 250 feet of steel cable, had caught in a deep outcropping of rock. A fouled anchor had

brought him up short, less than half a mile from the cliffs. He was saved—

For the moment, at least.

But the wind hadn't given up yet. The 193-mile-an-hour wind bellowed, lifted the truck bodily, slammed it down, lifted it again, slammed it down. The steel cable hummed like a guitar string. Clayton wrapped his arms and legs around the seat. He couldn't hold on much longer. And if he let go, the madly leaping Brute would smear him over the walls like toothpaste—

If the cable didn't part first and send him hurtling into the cliffs.

He held on. At the top of one swing, he caught a glimpse of the wind-speed indicator. The sight of it sickened him. He was through, finished, done for. How could he be expected to hold on through the force of a 187-mile-an-hour wind? It was too much.

It was—187 miles an hour? That meant that the wind was dropping!

He could hardly believe it at first. But slowly, steadily, the dial hand crept down. At 160 miles an hour, the truck stopped slamming and lay passively at the end of its anchor line. At 153, the wind veered—a sure sign that the blow was nearly over.

When it had dropped to 142 miles an hour, Clayton allowed himself the luxury of passing out.

Carellan natives came out for him later in the day. Skillfully they maneuvered two big land ships up to the Brute, fastened on their long vines—which tested out stronger than steel—and towed the derelict truck back to the station.

They brought him into the receiving shed, and Nerishev carried him into the station's dead air.

"You didn't break anything except a couple of teeth," said Nerishev. "But there isn't an unbruised inch on you."

"We came through it," Clayton said.

"Just. Our boulder defense is completely flattened. The station took two direct hits from boulders and barely contained them. I've checked the foundations; they're badly strained. Another blow like that—"

"—and we'd make out somehow. Us Earth lads, we come through! That was the worst in eight months. Four months more and the relief ship comes! Buck up, Nerishev. Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"I want to talk to that damned Smanik!"

They came into the shed. It was filled to overflowing with Carellans. Outside, in the lee of the station, several dozen land ships were moored.

"Smanik!" Clayton called. "What's going on here?"

"It is the Festival of Summer," Smanik said. "Our great yearly holiday."

"Hm. What about that blow? What did you think of it?"

"I would classify it as a moderate gale," said Smanik. "Nothing dangerous, but somewhat unpleasant for sailing."

"Unpleasant! I hope you get your forecasts a little more accurate in the future."

"One cannot always outguess the weather," Smanik said. "It is regrettable that my last forecast should be wrong."

"Your *last?* How come? What's the matter?"

"These people," Smanik said, gesturing around him, "are my entire tribe, the Seremai. We have celebrated the Festival of Summer. Now summer is ended and we must go away."

"Where to?"

"To the caverns in the far west. They are two weeks' sail from here. We will go into the caverns

and live there for three months. In that way, we will find safety."

Clayton had a sudden sinking feeling in his stomach. "Safety from what, Smanik?"

"I told you. Summer is over. We need safety now from the winds—the powerful storm winds of winter."

"What is it?" Nerishev said.

"In a moment." Clayton thought very quickly of the super-hurricane he had just passed through, which Smanik had classified as a moderate and harmless gale. He thought of their immobility, the ruined Brute, the strained foundations of the station, the wrecked boulder barrier, the relief ship four months away. "We could go with you in the land ships, Smanik, and take refuge in the caverns with you—be protected—"

"Of course," said Smanik hospitably.

"No, we couldn't," Clayton answered himself, his sinking feeling even lower than during the storm. "We'd need extra oxygen, our own food, a water supply—"

"What is it?" Nerishev repeated impatiently. "What the devil did he say to make you look like that?"

"He says the *really* big winds are just coming," Clayton replied.

The two men stared at each other.

Outside, a wind was rising.

DAWN INVADER

THERE were eleven planets in that system, and Dillon found that the outer ones contained no life whatsoever. The fourth planet from the sun had once been populated, and the third would someday be. But on the second, a blue world with a single moon, intelligent life existed, and to this planet Dillon directed his ship.

He approached stealthily, slipping through the atmosphere under cover of darkness, descending through thick rain clouds looking much like a cloud himself. He landed with that absolute lack of commotion possible only for an Earthman.

When his ship finally settled it was an hour before dawn, the safe hour, the time when most creatures, no matter what planet has spawned them, are least alert. Or so his father had told him before he left Earth. Invading before dawn was part of the lore of Earth, hard-won knowledge directed solely toward survival on alien planets.

"But all this knowledge is *fallible*," his father had reminded him. "For it deals with that least predictable of entities, intelligent life." The old man had nodded sententiously as he made that statement.

"Remember, my boy," the old man went on, "you can outwit a meteor, predict an ice age, outguess a nova. But what, truthfully, can you know about those baffling and constantly changing entities who are possessed of intelligence?"

Not very much, Dillon realized. But he believed in his own youth, fire, and cunning, and he trusted the unique Terran invasion technique. With that special skill, an Earthman could battle his way to the top of any environment, no matter how alien, no matter how hostile.

From the day he was born, Dillon had been taught that life is incessant combat. He had learned that the galaxy *is* large and unfriendly, made up mostly of incandescent suns and empty space. But sometimes there are planets, and on these planets are races, differing vastly in shape and size, but alike in one respect: their hatred for anything unlike themselves. No cooperation was possible between these races. For an Earthman to live among them called for the utmost in skill, stamina, and cunning. And even then, survival would be impossible without Earth's devastating technique of invasion.

Dillon had been an apt student, eager to face his destiny in the great galaxy. He had enlisted for the Exodus, not waiting to be drafted. And finally, like millions of young men before him, he had been given his own spaceship and sent out, leaving small, overcrowded Earth forever behind. He had flown to the limit of his fuel. And now his destiny lay before him.

His ship rested in a clump of jungle near a thatch-roofed village, almost invisible in dense underbrush. He waited, tense behind his controls, until the dawn came up white, with red hints of sunrise in it. But no one came near, no bomb fell, no shells burst. He had to assume that he had landed undetected.

When the planet's yellow sun touched the rim of the horizon, Dillon emerged and sized up his physical surroundings. He sniffed the air, felt the gravity, estimated the sun's spectrum and power, and sadly shook his head. This planet, like most planets in the galaxy, would not support Terra life. He had perhaps an hour in which to complete his invasion.

He touched a button on his instrument panel and walked quickly away. Behind him, his ship dissolved into a gray ash. The ash scattered on the morning breeze and dispersed over the jungle.

Now he was committed irrevocably. He moved toward the alien village.

As he approached he saw that the aliens' huts were crude affairs of wood and thatch, a few of hand-hewn stone. They seemed durable and sufficient for the climate. There was no sign of roads—only a single footpath leading into the jungle. There were no power installations, no manufactured articles. This, he decided, was an early civilization, one he should have no difficulty mastering.

Confidently he stepped forward, and almost bumped into an alien.

They stared at each other. The alien was bipedal, considerably taller than an Earthman, with a good cranial capacity. He wore a single striped garment wrapped around his waist. His skin was pigmented a light brown beneath gray fur. He showed no tendency to run.

"Ir tai!" the creature said, sounds which Dillon interpreted as a cry of surprise. Looking hastily around, he saw that no other villager had discovered him yet. He tensed slightly and leaned forward.

"K'tal tai a—"

Dillon leaped like a great spring unfolding. The alien tried to dodge, but Dillon twisted in midair like a cat and managed to clamp a hand around one of the alien's limbs.

That was all he needed. Now physical contact had been established. The rest should be easy.

For hundreds of years, an exploding birth rate had forced the inhabitants of Earth to migrate in ever-increasing numbers. But not one planet in ten thousand was suitable for human life. Therefore, Earth considered the possibility of altering alien environments to suit Terran needs, or changing men biologically to suit the new environments. But there was a third method which yielded the greatest returns for the least effort. This was to develop the mind-projecting tendency latent in all intelligent races.

Earth bred for it, concentrated and trained it. With this ability, an Earthman could live on any planet simply by taking over the mind of one of its inhabitants. This done, he had a body tailor-made for its environment, and filled with useful and interesting information. Once an Earthman was established, his love of competition usually carried him to a preeminent position in the new world he had invaded.

There was only one slight hitch; an alien usually resented having his mind invaded. And sometimes, he was able to do something about it.

In the first instant of penetration, Dillon sensed, with passionate regret, his own body collapsing, folding in on itself. It would dissolve immediately, leaving no trace. Only he and his host would know an invasion had taken place.

And at the end, only one of them would know.

Now, within the alien mind, Dillon concentrated entirely on the job ahead. Barriers went down one after another as he drove hard toward the center, where the I-am-I existed. When he entered that citadel and succeeded in driving out the ego now occupying it, the body would be his.

Hastily erected defenses dissolved before him. For an instant, Dillon thought that his first wild rush was going to carry him all the way. Then, suddenly, he was directionless, wandering through a gray and featureless no-man's-land.

The alien had recovered from his initial shock. Dillon could sense energies slowly growing around him.

Now he was really in for a fight.

A parlay was held in the no-man's-land of the alien's mind.

"Who are you?"

"Edward Dillon, from the planet Earth. And you?"

"Arek. We call this planet K'egra. What do you want here, Dillon?"

"A little living space, Arek," Dillon said, grinning. "Can you spare it?"

"Well, I'll be damned.... Get out of my mind!"

"I can't," Dillon said. "I have no place to go."

"I see," Arek mused. "Tough. But you *are* uninvited. And something tells me you want more than just living room. You want everything, don't you?"

"I must have control," Dillon admitted. "There's no other way. But if you don't struggle, perhaps I can leave a space for you, although it isn't customary."

"It isn't?"

"Of course not," Dillon said. "Different races can't exist together. That's a law of nature. The stronger drives out the weaker. But I might be willing to try it for a while."

"Don't do me any favors," Arek said, and broke off contact.

The grayness of no-man's-land turned solid black. And Dillon, waiting for the coming struggle, felt the first pang of self-doubt.

Arek was a primitive. He couldn't have any training in mind-combat. Yet he grasped the situation at once, adjusted to it, and was now prepared to deal with it. Probably his efforts would be feeble, but still ...

What kind of a creature was this?

He was standing on a rocky hillside, surrounded by ragged cliffs. Far ahead was a tall range of misty blue mountains. The sun was in his eyes, blinding and hot. A black speck crawled up the hillside toward him.

Dillon kicked a stone out of his way and waited for the speck to resolve. This was the pattern of mental combat, where thought becomes physical, and ideas are touchable things.

The speck became a K'egran. Suddenly he loomed above Dillon, enormous, glistening with muscle, armed with sword and dagger.

Dillon moved back, avoiding the first stroke. The fight was proceeding in a recognizable—and controllable—pattern. Aliens usually conjured an idealized image of their race, with its attributes magnified and augmented. The figure was invariably fearsome, superhuman, irresistible. But usually, it had a rather subtle flaw. Dillon decided to gamble on its presence here.

The K'egran lunged ahead. Dillon dodged, dropped to the ground, and lashed out with both feet, leaving his body momentarily exposed. The K'egran tried to parry and respond, but too slowly. The blow from Dillon's booted feet caught him powerfully in the stomach.

Exultantly, Dillon bounded forward. The flaw was there!

He ran in under the sword, feinted, and, while the K'egran tried to guard, neatly broke his neck with two blows of the edge of his hand.

The K'egran fell, shaking the ground. Dillon watched him die with a certain sympathy. The idealized racial fighting image was larger than life, stronger, braver, more enduring. But it always had a certain ponderousness about it, a sure and terrible majesty. This was excellent for an image—but not for a fighting machine. It meant slow reaction time, which meant death.

The dead giant vanished. Dillon thought for a moment that he had won. Then he heard a snarl behind him. He whirled and saw a long, low black beast, panther-like, with ears laid back and teeth bared.

So Arek had reserves. But Dillon knew how much energy this kind of a fight used up. In a while, the alien's reserves would be gone. And then ...

Dillon picked up the giant's sword and moved back, the panther advancing, until he found a high boulder against which he could set his back. A waist-high rock in front of him served as a parapet, across which the panther had to leap. The sun hung before him, in his eyes, and a light breeze blew dust in his face. He swung back the sword as the panther leaped.

During the next slow hours, Dillon met and destroyed a complete sampling of K'egra's more deadly creatures, and dealt with them as he would deal with similar animals on Earth. The rhinoceros —at least, it resembled one—was easy in spite of its formidable size and speed. He was able to lure it to a cliff edge and goad it into charging over. The cobra was more dangerous, nearly spitting poison in his eyes before he was able to slash it in half. The gorilla was powerful, strong, and terribly quick. But he could never get his bone-crushing hands on Dillon, who danced back and forth, slashing him to shreds. The tyrannosaurus was armored and tenacious. It took an avalanche to bury him. And Dillon lost count of the others. But at the end, sick with fatigue, his sword reduced to a jagged splinter, he stood alone.

"Had enough, Dillon?" Arek asked.

"Not at all," Dillon answered, through thirst-blackened lips. "You can't go on forever, Arek. There's a limit to even your vitality."

"Really?" Arek asked.

"You can't have much left," Dillon said, trying to show a confidence he did not feel. "Why not be reasonable? I'll leave you room, Arek, I really will. I ... well, I sort of respect you."

"Thanks, Dillon," Arek said. "The feeling is sort of mutual. Now, if you'd give in—"

"No," Dillon said. "*My* terms."

"OK," Arek said. "You asked for it!"

"Bring it on," Dillon muttered.

Abruptly, the rocky hillside vanished.

He was standing knee-deep in a gray marsh. Great gnarled trees rank with moss rose from the still green water. Lilies white as a fish's belly jerked and swayed, although there was no breeze at all. A dead white vapor hung over the water and clung to the trees' rough bark. There was not a sound in the swamp, although Dillon sensed life all around him.

He waited, turning slowly around. He sniffed the stagnant, slow-moving air, shuffled his feet in the gluey mud, smelled the decaying fragrance of the lilies. And a realization came to him.

This swamp had never existed on K'egra!

He knew it, with the certainty with which an Earthman senses alien worlds. The gravity was different, and the air was different. Even the mud beneath his feet was unlike the mud of K'egra.

The implications came crowding in, too quickly to be sorted. Could K'egra have space travel, then? Impossible! Then how could Arek know so well a planet other than his own? Had he read about it, imagined it, or—

Something solid glanced heavily off his shoulder. In his speculation, the attack had caught Dillon off guard.

He tried to move, but the mud clung to his feet. A branch had fallen from one of the giant overhanging trees. As he watched, the trees began to sway and crackle. Boughs bent and creaked, then broke, raining down upon him.

But there was no wind.

Half stunned, Dillon fought his way through the swamp, trying to find solid ground and a space away from the trees. But the great trunks lay everywhere, and there was no solidness in the swamp.

The rain of branches increased, and Dillon whirled back and forth, looking for something to fight against. But there was only the silent swamp.

"Come out and fight!" Dillon shrieked. He was beaten to his knees, stood up, fell again. Then, half-conscious, he saw a place of refuge.

He struggled to a great tree and clung tightly to its roots. Boughs fell, branches whipped and slashed, but the tree couldn't reach him. He was safe!

But then he saw, with horror, that the lilies at the base of the tree had twined their long stalks around his ankles. He tried to kick them loose. They bent like pale snakes and clung tighter to him. He slashed them loose and ran from the shelter of the tree.

"Fight me!" Dillon begged, as the branches rained around him. There was no answer. The lilies writhed on their stalks, reaching for him. Overhead was a whirr of angry wings. The birds of the swamp were gathering, black and ragged carrion crows, waiting for the end. And as Dillon swayed on his feet, he felt something warm and terrible touch his ankles.

Then he knew what he had to do.

It took a moment to get up his courage. Then Dillon plunged head-first into the dirty green water.

As soon as he dived, the swamp became silent. The giant trees froze against the slate sky. The lilies lost their frenzy and hung limp on their stalks. The white vapor clung motionless to the rough bark of the trees, and the birds of prey glided silently through the thick air.

For a while, bubbles frothed to the surface. Then the bubbles stopped.

Dillon came up, gasping for breath, deep scratches across his neck and back. In his hands was the shapeless, transparent creature who ruled the swamp.

He waded to a tree and swung the limp creature against it, shattering it completely. Then he sat down.

Never had he been so tired and so sick, and so convinced of the futility of everything. Why was he struggling for life, when life occupied so insignificant a part in the scheme of things? Of what significance was his instant of life, measured against the swing of the planets, or the stately flaming of the stars? And Dillon was amazed at the lewdness with which he was scrambling for existence.

The warm water lapped around his chest. Life, Dillon told himself sleepily, is nothing more than an itch on the hide of the non-living, a parasite of matter. Quantity counts, he told himself, as the water stroked his neck. What is the tininess of life compared to the vastness of nonliving? If nonliving is natural, he thought as the water touched his chin, then to live is to be diseased. And life's only healthy thought is the wish for death.

Death was a pleasant thought at that moment, as the water caressed his lips. There was a tiredness past resting, and a sickness past healing. Now it would be easy to let go, go down, abandon—

"Very good," Dillon whispered, pulling himself to his feet. "Very good try, Arek. Perhaps you're tired, too? Perhaps there's not much left in you but a little emotion?"

It grew dark, and in the dark something whispered to Dillon, something that looked like him in miniature, that curled itself warmly on his shoulder.

"But there are worse things than death," his miniature said. "There are things no living being can face, guilty knowledge concealed in the very bottom of the soul, loathed and detested, but *knowledge*, and never to be denied. Death is better than this knowledge, Dillon. Death becomes precious, and infinitely costly. Death is to be prayed for, and cunning schemes are laid to capture death—when you must face what lies at the bottom of your soul."

Dillon tried not to listen to the creature who looked so much like himself. But the miniature clung to his shoulder and pointed. And Dillon saw something forming in the darkness, and recognized its

form.

"Not this, Dillon," his double pleaded. "Please, not this! Be courageous, Dillon! Choose your death! Be bold, be brave! Know how to die at the right time!"

Dillon, recognizing the shape of what was coming toward him, felt a fear he would never have imagined possible. For this was knowledge from the bottom of his soul, guilty knowledge of himself and all he ever thought he stood for.

"Quickly, Dillon!" his double cried. "Be strong, be bold, be true! *Die while you still know what you are!*"

And Dillon wanted to die. With a vast sigh of relief he began to release his hold, to let his essence slip away ...

And couldn't.

"Help me!" he screamed.

"I can't!" his miniature screamed back. "You must do this for yourself!"

And Dillon tried again, with knowledge pressing close to his eyeballs, asked for death, begged for death, and could not let himself die.

So there was only one thing to do. He gathered his last strength and flung himself despairingly forward, at the shape that danced before him.

It disappeared.

After a moment Dillon realized that every threat was gone. He was standing alone in territory he had conquered. In spite of everything, he had won! Before him now lay the citadel, untenanted, waiting for him. He felt a wave of respect for poor Arek. He had been a good fighter, a worthy adversary. Perhaps he could spare him a little living space, if Arek didn't try to—

"That's very kind of you, Dillon," a voice boomed out.

Dillon had no time to react. He was caught in a grip so powerful that any thought of resistance was futile. Only then did he sense the real power of the K'egran's mind.

"You did well, Dillon," Arek said. "You need never be ashamed of the fight you fought."

"But I never had a chance," Dillon said.

"No, never," Arek said gently. "You thought the Earth invasion plan was unique, as most young races feel. But K'egra is ancient, Dillon, and in our time we have been invaded many times, physically and mentally. So it's really nothing new for us."

"You played with me!" Dillon cried.

"I wanted to find out what you were like," Arek said.

"How smug you must have felt! It was a game with you. All right, get it over with, finish it!"

"Finish what?"

"Kill me!"

"Why should I kill you?" Arek asked.

"Because—because what else can you do with me? Why should I be treated differently from the rest?"

"You met some of the others, Dillon. You wrestled with Ehtan, who had inhabited a swamp on his home planet, before he took to voyaging. And the miniature who whispered so persuasively in your ear is Oolermik, who came not too long ago, all bluster and fire, much like yourself."

"But—"

"We accepted them here, made room for them, used their qualities to complement ours. Together we are more than we had been apart."

"You live together?" Dillon whispered. "In *your* body?"

"Of course. Good bodies are scarce in the galaxy, and there's not much room for the living. Dillon, meet my partners."

And Dillon saw the amorphous swamp creature again, and the scaly-hided Oolermik, and a dozen others.

"But it can't be!" Dillon cried. "Alien races can't live together! Life is struggle and death! That's a fundamental law of nature."

"An early law," Arek said. "Long ago we discovered that cooperation means survival for all, and on far better terms. You'll get used to it. Welcome into the confederacy, Dillon!"

And Dillon, still dazed, entered the citadel, to sit in partnership with many races of the galaxy.

DOUBLE INDEMNITY

EVERETT Barthold didn't take out a life insurance policy casually. First he read up on the subject, with special attention to Breach of Contract, Willful Deceit, Temporal Fraud, and Payment. He checked to find how closely insurance companies investigated before paying a claim. And he acquired a considerable degree of knowledge on Double Indemnity, a subject which interested him acutely.

When this preliminary work was done, he looked for an insurance company which would suit his needs. He decided, finally, upon the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation, with its main office in Hartford, Present Time. Inter-Temporal had branch offices in the New York of 1959; Rome, 1530; and Constantinople, 1126. Thus they offered full temporal coverage. This was important to Barthold's plans.

Before applying for his policy, Barthold discussed the plan with his wife. Mavis Barthold was a thin, handsome, restless woman, with a cautious, contrary feline nature.

"It'll never work," she said at once.

"It's foolproof," Barthold told her firmly.

"They'll lock you up and throw away the key."

"Not a chance," Barthold assured her. "It can't miss—if you cooperate."

"That would make me an accessory," said his wife. "No, darling."

"My dear, I seem to remember you expressing a desire for a coat of genuine Martian scart. I believe there are very few in existence."

Mrs. Barthold's eyes glittered. Her husband, with canny accuracy, had hit her weak spot.

"And I thought," Barthold said carelessly, "that you might derive some pleasure from a new Daimler hyper-jet, a Letti Det wardrobe, a string of matched ruumstones, a villa on the Venusian Riviera, a—"

"Enough, darling!" Mrs. Barthold gazed fondly upon her enterprising husband. She had long suspected that within his unprepossessing body beat a stout heart. Barthold was short, beginning to bald, his features ordinary, and his eyes were mild behind horn-rimmed glasses. But his spirit would have been perfectly at home in a pirate's great-muscled frame.

"Then you're sure it will work?" she asked him.

"Quite sure, if you do what I tell you and restrain your fine talent for overacting."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Barthold, her mind fixed upon the glitter of ruumstones and the sensuous caress of scart fur.

Barthold made his final preparations. He went to a little shop where some things were advertised and other things sold. He left, several thousand dollars poorer, with a small brown suitcase tucked tightly under his arm. The money was untraceable. He had been saving it, in small bills, for several years. And the contents of the brown suitcase were equally untraceable.

He deposited the suitcase in a public storage box, drew a deep breath, and presented himself at the offices of the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation.

For half a day, the doctors poked and probed at him. He filled out the forms and was brought, at last, to the office of Mr. Gryns, the regional manager.

Gryns was a large, affable man. He read quickly through Barthold's application, nodding to himself.

"Fine, fine," he said. "Everything seems to be in order. Except for one thing."

"What's that?" Barthold asked, his heart suddenly pounding.

"The question of additional coverage. Would you be interested in fire and theft? Liability? Accident and health? We insure against everything from a musket ball to such trivial but annoying afflictions as the very definitely common cold."

"Oh," said Barthold, his pulse rate subsiding to normal. "No, thank you. At present, I am concerned only with a life insurance policy. My business requires me to travel through time. I wish adequate protection for my wife."

"Of course, sir, absolutely," Gryns said. "Then I believe everything is in order. Do you understand the various conditions that apply to this policy?"

"I think I do," replied Barthold, who had spent months studying the Inter-Temporal standard form.

"The policy runs for the life of the assured," said Mr. Gryns. "And the duration of that life is measured only in subjective physiological time. The policy protects you over a distance of one thousand years on either side of the Present. But no further. The risks are too great."

"I wouldn't dream of going any further," Barthold said.

"And the policy contains the usual double indemnity clause. Do you understand its function and conditions?"

"I believe so," answered Barthold, who knew it word for word.

"All is in order, then. Sign right here. And here. Thank you, sir."

"Thank *you*," said Barthold. And he really meant it.

Barthold returned to his office. He was sales manager for the Alpro Manufacturing Company (Toys for All the Ages). He announced his intention to leave at once on a sales tour of the Past.

"Our sales in time are simply not what they should be," he said. "I'm going back there myself and take a personal hand in the selling."

"Marvelous!" cried Mr. Carlisle, the president of Alpro. "I've been hoping for this for a long time, Everett."

"I know you have, Mr. Carlisle. Well, sir, I came to the decision just recently. Go back there yourself, I decided, and find out what's going on. Went out and made my preparations, and now I'm ready to leave."

Mr. Carlisle patted him on the shoulder. "You're the best salesman Alpro ever had, Everett. I'm very glad you decided to go."

"I am, too, Mr. Carlisle."

"Give 'em hell! And by the way—" Mr. Carlisle grinned slyly—"I've got an address in Kansas City, 1895, that you might be interested in. They just don't build 'em that way any more. And in San Francisco, 1840, I know a—"

"No, thank you, sir," Barthold said.

"Strictly business, eh, Everett?"

"Yes, sir," Barthold said, with a virtuous smile. "Strictly business."

Everything was in order now. Barthold went home and packed and gave his wife her last instructions.

"Remember," he told her, "when the time comes, act surprised, but don't simulate a nervous breakdown. Be confused, not psychotic."

"I *know*," she said. "Do you think I'm stupid or something?"

"No, dear. It's just that you *do* have a tendency to wring every bit of emotion out of situations. Too

little would be wrong. So would too much."

"Honey," said Mrs. Barthold in a very small voice.

"Yes?"

"Do you suppose I could buy one little ruumstone now? Just one to sort of keep me company until —"

"No! Do you want to give the whole thing away? Damn it all, Mavis—"

"All right. I was only asking. Good luck, darling."

"Thank you, darling."

They kissed.

And Barthold left.

He reclaimed his brown suitcase from the public storage box. Then he took a heli to the main showroom of Temporal Motors. After due consideration, he bought a Class A Unlimited Flipper and paid for it in cash.

"You'll never regret this, sir," said the salesman, removing the price tag from the glittering machine. "Plenty of power in this baby! Double impeller. Full control in all years. No chance of being caught in stasis in a Fipper."

"Fine," Barthold said. "I'll just get in and—"

"Let me help you with those suitcases, sir. You understand that there is a federal tax based upon your temporal mileage?"

"I know," Barthold said, carefully stowing his brown suitcase in the back of the Flipper. "Thanks a lot. I'll just get in and—"

"Right, sir. The time clock is set at zero and will record your jumps. Here is a list of time zones proscribed by the government. Another list is pasted to the dashboard. They include all major war and disaster areas, as well as Paradox Points. There is a federal penalty for entering a proscribed area. Any such entry will show on the time clock."

"I know all this." Barthold suddenly was very nervous. The salesman couldn't suspect, of course. But why was he going on gabbling so about breaches of the law?

"I am required to tell you the regulations," the salesman said cheerfully. "Now, sir, in addition, there is a thousand-year limit on time jumps. No one is allowed beyond that, except with written permission from the State Department."

"A very proper precaution," Barthold said, "and one which my insurance company has already advised me of."

"Then that takes care of everything. Pleasant journey, sir! You'll find your Flipper the perfect vehicle for business or pleasure. Whether your destination is the rocky roads of Mexico, 1932, or the damp tropics of Canada, 2308, your Flipper will see you through."

Barthold smiled woodenly, shook the salesman's hand, and entered the Flipper. He closed the door, adjusted his safety belt, started the motor. Leaning forward, teeth set, he calibrated his jump.

Then he punched the send-off switch.

A gray nothingness surrounded him. Barthold had a moment of absolute panic. He fought it down and experienced a thrill of fierce elation.

At last, he was on his way to fortune!

Impenetrable grayness surrounded the Flipper like a faint and endless fog. Barthold thought of the years slipping by, formless and without end, gray world, gray universe ...

But there was no time for philosophical thoughts. Barthold unlocked the small brown suitcase and

removed a sheaf of typed papers. The papers, gathered for him by a temporal investigation agency, contained a complete history of the Barthold family, down to its earliest origins.

He had spent a long time studying that history. His plans required a Barthold. But not just *any* Barthold. He needed a male Barthold, thirty-eight years old, unmarried, out of touch with his family, with no close friends and no important job. If possible, with no job at all.

He needed a Barthold, who, if he suddenly vanished, would never be missed, never searched for.

With those specifications, Barthold had been able to cut thousands of Bartholds out of his list. Most male Bartholds were married by the age of thirty-eight. Some hadn't lived that long. Others, single and unattached at thirty-eight, had good friends and strong family ties. Some, out of contact with family and friends, were men whose disappearance would be investigated.

After a good deal of culling, Barthold was left with a mere handful. These he would check, in the hope of finding one who suited all his requirements ...

If such a man existed, he thought, and quickly banished the thought from his mind.

After a while, the grayness dissolved. He looked out and saw that he was on a cobblestone street. An odd, high-sided automobile chugged past him, driven by a man in a straw hat.

He was in New York, 1912.

The first man on his list was Jack Barthold, known to his friends as Bully Jack, a journeyman printer with a wandering eye and a restless foot. Jack had deserted his wife and three children in Cheyenne in 1902, with no intention of returning. For Barthold's purposes, this made him as good as single. Bully Jack had served a hitch with General Pershing, then returned to his trade. He drifted from print shop to print shop, never staying long. Now, at the age of thirty-eight, he was working somewhere in New York.

Barthold started at the Battery and began hunting his way through New York's print shops. At the eleventh one, on Water Street, he located his man.

"You want Jack Barthold?" an old master printer asked him. "Sure, he's in the back. Hey, Jack! Fellow to see you!"

Barthold's pulse quickened. A man was coming toward him, out of the dark recesses of the shop. The man approached, scowling.

"I'm Jack Barthold," he said. "Whatcha want?"

Barthold looked at his relative and sadly shook his head. This Barthold obviously would not do.

"Nothing," he said, "nothing at all." He turned quickly and left the shop.

Bully Jack, five foot eight inches tall and weighing two hundred and ninety pounds, scratched his head.

"Now what in hell was all that about?" he asked.

The old master printer shrugged his shoulders.

Everett Barthold returned to his Flipper and reset the controls. A pity, he told himself, but a fat man would never fit into his plans.

His next stop was Memphis, 1869. Dressed in an appropriate costume, Barthold went to the Dixie Belle Hotel and inquired at the desk for Ben Bartholder.

"Well, suh," said the courtly white-haired old man behind the desk, "his key's in, so I reckon he's out. You might find him in the corner saloon with the other trashy carpetbaggers."

Barthold let the insult pass and went to the saloon.

It was early evening, but the gaslights were already blazing. Someone was strumming a banjo, and the long mahogany bar was crowded.

"Where could I find Ben Bartholder?" Barthold asked a bartender.

"Ovah theah," the bartender said, "with the other Yankee drummers."

Barthold walked over to a long table at one end of the saloon. It was crowded with flashily dressed men and painted women. The men were obviously Northern salesmen, loud, self-confident, and demanding. The women were Southerners. But that was their business, Barthold decided.

As soon as he reached the table, he spotted his man. There was no mistaking Ben Bartholder.

He looked exactly like Everett Barthold.

And that was the vital characteristic Barthold was looking for.

"Mr. Bartholder," he said, "might I have a word with you in private?"

"Why not?" said Ben Bartholder.

Barthold led the way to a vacant table. His relative sat opposite him, staring intently.

"Sir," said Ben, "there is an uncanny resemblance between us."

"Indeed there is," replied Barthold. "It's part of the reason I'm here."

"And the other part?"

"I'll come to that presently. Would you care for a drink?"

Barthold ordered, noticing that Ben kept his right hand in his lap, out of sight. He wondered if that hand held a derringer. Northerners had to be wary in these Reconstructionist days.

After the drinks were served, Barthold said, "I'll come directly to the point. Would you be interested in acquiring a rather large fortune?"

"What man wouldn't?"

"Even if it involved a long and arduous journey?"

"I've come all the way from Chicago," Ben said. "I'll go farther."

"And if it comes to breaking a few laws?"

"You'll find Ben Bartholder ready for anything, sir, if there's some profit to it. But who are you and what is your proposition?"

"Not here," Barthold said. "Is there some place where we can be assured of privacy?"

"My hotel room."

"Let's go, then."

Both men stood up. Barthold glanced at Ben's right hand and gasped.

Benjamin Bartholder had no right hand.

"Lost it at Vicksburg," explained Ben, seeing Barthold's shocked stare. "It doesn't matter. I'll take on any man in the world with one hand and a stump—and lick him!"

"I'm sure of it," Barthold said a little wildly. "I admire your spirit, sir. Wait here a moment. I—I'll be right back."

Barthold hurried out of the saloon's swinging doors and went directly to his Flipper. A pity, he thought, setting the controls. Benjamin Bartholder would have been perfect.

But a maimed man wouldn't fit into his plan.

The next jump was to Prussia, 1676. With a hypnoed knowledge of German and clothes of suitable shape and hue, he walked the deserted streets of Konigsberg, looking for Hans Baerthaler.

It was midday, but the streets were strangely, eerily deserted. Barthold walked and finally encountered a monk.

"Baerthaler?" mused the monk. "Oh, you mean old Otto the tailor! He lives now in Ravensburg,

good sir."

"That must be the father," Barthold said. "I seek Hans Baerthaler, the son."

"Hans ... of course!" The monk nodded vigorously, then gave Barthold a quizzical look. "But are you sure that's the man you want?"

"Quite sure," Barthold said. "Could you direct me to him?"

"You can find him at the cathedral," said the monk. "Come, I'm going there myself."

Barthold followed the monk, wondering if his information could be wrong. The Baerthaler he sought wasn't a priest. He was a mercenary soldier who had fought all over Europe. His type would never be found at a cathedral—unless, Barthold thought with a shudder, Baerthaler had unreportedly acquired religion.

Fervently he prayed that this wasn't so. It would ruin everything.

"Here we are, sir," the monk said, stopping in front of a noble, soaring structure. "And there is Hans Baerthaler."

Barthold looked. He saw a man sitting on the cathedral steps, a man dressed all in rags. In front of him was a shapeless old hat and within the hat were two copper coins and a crust of bread.

"A beggar," Barthold grunted disgustedly. Still, perhaps ...

He looked closer and noticed the blank, vacuous expression in the beggar's eyes, the slack jaw, the twisted, leering lips.

"A great pity," the monk said. "Hans Baerthaler received a head wound fighting against the Swedes at Fehrbellin and never recovered his senses. A terrible pity."

Barthold nodded, looking around at the empty cathedral square, the deserted streets.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"Why, sir, surely you must know! Everyone has fled Konigsberg except me and him. It is the Black Plague!"

With a shudder, Barthold turned and raced back through the empty streets, to his Flipper, his antibiotics, and to any other year but this one.

With a heavy heart and a sense of impending failure, Barthold journeyed again down the years, to London, 1595. At Little Boar Taverne near Great Hertford Cross, he made inquiry of one Thomas Barthal.

"And what would ye be wanting Barthal for?" asked the publican, in English so barbarous that Barthold could barely make it out.

"I have business with him," said Barthold in his hypnoed Old English.

"Have you indeed?" The publican glanced up and down at Barthold's ruffed finery. "Have you really now?"

The tavern was a low, noisome place, lighted only by two guttering tallow candles. Its customers, who now gathered around Barthold and pressed close to him, looked like the lowest riffraff. They surrounded him, still gripping their pewter mugs, and Barthold detected, among their rags, the flash of keener metal.

"A nark, eh?"

"What in hell's a nark doing in here?"

"Daft, perhaps."

"Past a doubt, to come alone."

"And asking *us* to give um poor Tom Barthal!"

"We'll give um something, lads!"

"Ay, let's give um!"

The publican watched, grinning, as the ragged crowd advanced on Barthold, their pewter mugs held like maces. They backed him past the leaded windows, against the wall. And only then did Barthold fully realize the danger he faced in this unruly pack of vagabonds.

"I'm no nark!" he cried.

"The hell you say!" The mob pressed forward and a heavy mug crashed against the oak wall near his head.

With a sudden inspiration, Barthold swept off his great plumed hat. "Look at me!"

They stopped, gazing at him open-mouthed.

"The perfect image of Tom Barthal!" one gasped.

"But Tom never said he had a brother," another pointed out.

"We were twins," Barthold said rapidly, "separated at birth. I was raised in Normandy, Aquitaine, and Cornwall. I found out only last month that I had a twin brother. And I'm here to meet him."

It was a perfectly creditable story for sixteenth-century England and the resemblance could not be gainsaid. Barthold was brought to a table and a mug of ale set before him.

"You've come late, lad," an ancient one-eyed beggar told him. "A fine worker he was and a clever one at prigging a prancer—"

Barthold recognized the old term for horse thief.

"—but they took him at Aylesbury, and tried him with the hookers and the freshwater marines, and found him guilty, worse luck."

"What's his fine?" Barthold asked.

"A severe one," said a stocky rogue. "They're hanging him today at Shrew's Marker!"

Barthold sat very still for a moment. Then he asked, "Does my brother really look like me?"

"The spitting image!" exclaimed the publican. "It's uncanny, man, and a thing to behold. Same looks, same height, same weight—everything the same!"

The others nodded their agreement. And Barthold, so close to success, decided to risk all. He *had* to have Tom Barthal!

"Now listen close to me, lads," he said. "You have no love for the narks or the London law, do you? Well, I'm a rich man in France, a very rich man. Would you like to come there with me and live like barons? Aye, take it easy—I knew you would. Well, we can do it, boys. But we have to bring my brother, too."

"But how?" asked a sturdy tinker. "They're hanging him this day!"

"Aren't you men?" demanded Barthold. "Aren't you armed? Wouldn't you dare strike out for fortune and a life of ease?"

They shouted their assent.

Barthold said, "I thought you'd be keen. You can. All you have to do is follow my instructions."

Only a small crowd had gathered at Shrew's Marker, for it was a small and insignificant hanging. Still, it afforded some amusement and the people cheered lustily as the horse-drawn prisoner's wagon rumbled over the cobbled streets and drew to a halt in front of the gibbet.

"There's Tom," murmured the tinker, at the edge of the crowd. "See him there?"

"I think so," Barthold said. "Let's move in."

He and his fifteen men pushed their way through the crowd, circling the gibbet. The hangman had already mounted the platform, had gazed over the crowd through the eye-slits in his black mask, and was now testing his rope. Two constables led Tom Barthal up the steps, positioned him, reached for

the rope ...

"Are you ready?" the publican asked Barthold. "Hey! Are you ready?"

Barthold was staring, open-mouthed, at the man on the platform. The family resemblance was unmistakable. Tom Barthal looked exactly like him—except for one thing.

Barthal's cheeks and forehead were deeply pitted with smallpox scars.

"Now's the moment for the rush," the publican said. "Are you ready, sir? Sir? *Hey!*"

He whirled and saw a plumed hat duck out of sight into an alley.

He started to give chase, but stopped abruptly. From the gibbet he heard a hiss, a stifled scream, a sodden thud. When he turned again, the plumed hat was out of sight.

Everett Barthold returned to his Flipper, deeply depressed. A disfigured man would not fit his plan.

In the Flipper, Barthold thought long and seriously. Things were going badly, very badly indeed. He had searched through time, all the way to medieval London, and had found no Barthold he could use. Now he was nearing the thousand-year limit.

He could go no further—

Not legally.

But legality was a matter of proof. He couldn't—he *wouldn't*—turn back now.

There had to be a usable Barthold somewhere in time!

He unlocked the small brown suitcase and took from it a small, heavy machine. He had paid several thousand dollars for it, back in Present Time. Now it was worth a lot more to him.

He set the machine carefully and plugged it into the time clock.

He was now free to go anywhere in time—back to primordial origins, if he wished. The time clock would not register.

He reset the controls, feeling suddenly very lonely. It was a frightening thing to plunge over the thousand-year brink. For a single instant, Barthold considered giving up the entire dubious venture, returning to the security of his own time, his own wife, his own job.

But, steeling himself, he jabbed the send-off button.

He emerged in England, 662, near the ancient stronghold of Maiden Castle. Hiding the Flipper in a thicket, he emerged wearing a simple clothing of coarse linen. He took the road toward Maiden Castle, which he could see in the far distance, upon a rise of land.

A group of soldiers passed him, drawing a cart. Within the cart, Barthold glimpsed the yellow glow of Baltic amber, red-glazed pottery from Gaul, and even Italian-looking candelabra. Loot, no doubt, Barthold thought, from the sack of some town. He wanted to question the soldiers, but they glared at him fiercely and he was glad to slink by unquestioned.

Next he passed two men, stripped to the waist, chanting in Latin. The man behind was lashing the man in front with a cruel, many-stranded leather whip. And presently they changed positions, with barely the loss of a stroke.

"I beg your pardon, sirs—"

But they wouldn't even look at him.

Barthold continued walking, mopping perspiration from his forehead. After a while, he overtook a cloaked man with a harp slung over one shoulder and a sword over the other.

"Sir," said Barthold, "might you know where I'd find a kinsman of mine, who has journeyed here from Iona? His name is Connor Lough mac Bairthre."

"I do," the man stated.

"Where?" asked Barthold.

"Standing before you," said the man. Immediately he stepped back, clearing his sword from its scabbard and slinging his harp to the grass.

Fascinated, Barthold stared at Bairthre. He saw, beneath the long page-boy hair, an exact and unmistakable likeness of himself.

At last he had found his man!

But his man was acting most uncooperative. Advancing slowly, sword held ready for cut or slash, Bairthre commanded, "Vanish, demon, or I'll carve you like a capon."

"I'm no demon!" Barthold cried. "I'm a kinsman of yours!"

"You lie," Bairthre declared firmly. "I'm a wandering man, true, and a long time away from home. But still I remember every member of my family. You're not one of them. So you must be a demon, taking my face for the purposes of enchantment."

"Wait!" Barthold begged as Bairthre's forearm tensed for the stroke. "Have you ever given a thought to the future?"

"The future?"

"Yes, the future! Centuries from now!"

"I've heard of that strange time, though I'm one who lives for today," Bairthre said, slowly lowering his sword. "We had a stranger in Iona once, called himself a Cornish-man when he was sober and a *Life* photographer when he was drunk. Walked around clicking a toy box at things and muttering to himself. Fill him up with mead and he'd tell you all about times to come."

"That's where I'm from," Barthold said. "I'm a distant kinsman of yours from the future. And I'm here to offer you an enormous fortune!"

Bairthre promptly sheathed his sword. "That's very kind of you, kinsman," he said civilly.

"But, of course, it will call for considerable cooperation on your part."

"I feared as much," Bairthre sighed. "Well, let's hear about it, kinsman."

"Come with me," Barthold said, and led the way to his Flipper.

All the materials were ready in the brown suitcase. He knocked Bairthre out with a palm hypo, since the Irishman was showing signs of nervousness. Then, attaching frontal electrodes to Bairthre's forehead, he hypnoed into him a quick outline of world history, a concise course in English, and one in American manners and customs.

This took the better part of two days. Meanwhile, Barthold used the swiftgraft machine he had bought to transfer skin from his fingers to Bairthre's. Now they had the same fingerprints. With normal cell-shedding, the prints would flake off in some months, revealing the original ones, but that wasn't important. They did not have to be permanent.

Then, using a checklist, Barthold added some identifying marks that Bairthre was lacking and removed some they didn't share. An electrolysis job took care of the fact that Barthold was balding and his kinsman hadn't been.

When he was finished, Barthold pumped revitalizer into Bairthre's veins and waited.

In a short while, Bairthre groaned, rubbed his hypno-stuffed head, and said in modern English, "Oh, man! What did you hit me with?"

"Don't worry about it," Barthold said. "Let's get down to business."

Briefly he explained his plan for getting rich at the expense of the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation.

"And they'll actually pay?" Bairthre asked.

"They will, if they can't disprove the claim."

"And they will pay *that* much?"

"Yes. I checked beforehand. The compensation for double indemnity is fantastically high."

"That's the part I still don't understand," Bairthre said. "What is this double indemnity?"

"It occurs," Barthold told him, "when a man, traveling into the past, has the misfortune to pass through a mirror-flaw in the temporal structure. It's a very rare occurrence. But when it happens, it's catastrophic. One man has gone into the past, you see. But two perfectly identical men return."

"Oho!" said Bairthre. "So *that's* double indemnity!"

"That's it. Two men, indistinguishable from each other, return from the past. Each feels that his is the true and original identity and that he is the only possible claimant of his property, business, wife, and so forth. No coexistence is possible between them. One of them must forfeit all rights, leave his present, his home, wife, business, and go into the past to live. The other remains in his own time, but lives with constant fear, apprehension, guilt."

Barthold paused for breath. "So you see," he continued, "under the circumstances, double indemnity represents a calamity of the first order. Therefore, both parties are compensated accordingly."

"Hmm," said Bairthre, thinking hard. "Has this happened often, this double indemnity?"

"Less than a dozen times in the history of time travel. There are precautions against it, such as staying out of Paradox Points and respecting the thousand-year barrier."

"You traveled more than a thousand years," Bairthre pointed out.

"I accepted the risk and won."

"But, look, if there's so much money in this double indemnity thing, why haven't others tried it?"

Barthold smiled wryly. "It's not as easy as it sounds. I'll tell you about it sometime. But now to business. Are you in this with me?"

"I could be a baron with that money," Bairthre said dreamily. "A king, perhaps, in Ireland! I'm in this with you."

"Fine. Sign this."

"What is it?" Bairthre asked, frowning at the legal-looking document that Barthold had thrust before him.

"It simply states that, upon receiving adequate compensation as set by the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation, you will go at once to a past of your own choosing and there remain, waiving any and all rights to the Present. Sign it as Everett Barthold. I'll fill in the date later."

"But the signature—" Bairthre began to object, then halted and grinned. "Through hypno-learning, I know about hypno-learning and what it can do, including the fact that you didn't have to give me the answers to my questions. As soon as I asked them, I knew the explanations. The mirror-flaw, too, by the way—that's why you hypnoed me into being left-handed and left-eyed. And, of course, the grafted fingerprints go the opposite way, the same as if you saw them in a mirror."

"Correct," said Barthold. "Any other questions?"

"None I can think of at the moment. I don't even have to compare our signatures. I know they'll be identical, except—" Again he paused and looked angry. "That's a lousy trick! I'll be writing backward!"

Barthold smiled. "Naturally. How else would you be a mirror-image of me? And just in case you decide you like my time better than yours and try to have *me* sent back, remember the precautions I took beforehand. They're good enough to send you to the Prison Planetoid for life."

He handed the document to Bairthre.

"You don't take any chances, do you?" Bairthre said, signing.

"I try to cover all eventualities. It's my home and my present that we're going to, and I plan to keep possession. Come on. You need a haircut and a general going-over."

Side by side, the identical-looking men walked to the Flipper.

Mavis Barthold didn't have to worry about overacting. When two Everett Bartholds walked in the front door, wearing identical garments, with the same expression of nervous embarrassment, and when two Everett Bartholds said, "Er, Mavis, this will take a little explaining ..."

It was just too much. Foreknowledge acted as no armor. She shrieked, threw her arms in the air, and fainted.

Later, when her two husbands had revived her, she regained some composure. "You did it, Everett!" she said. "Everett?"

"That's me," said Barthold. "Meet my kinsman, Connor Lough mac Bairthre."

"It's unbelievable!" cried Mrs. Barthold.

"Then we look alike?" her husband asked.

"Exactly alike. Just exactly!"

"From now on," said Barthold, "think of us both as Everett Barthold. The insurance investigators will be watching you. Remember—either of us, or both, could be your husband. Treat us exactly alike."

"As you wish, my dear," Mavis said demurely.

"Except, of course, for the matter of—I mean except in the area of—of—damn it all, Mavis, can't you really tell which one of us is me?"

"Of course I can, dear," Mavis said. "A wife always knows her husband." And she gave Bairthre a quick look, which he returned with interest.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Barthold. "Now I must contact the insurance company." He hurried into the other room.

"So you're a relative of my husband," Mavis said to Bairthre. "How alike you look!"

"But I'm really quite different," Bairthre assured her.

"Are you? You look so like him! I wonder if you really can be different."

"I'll prove it to you."

"How?"

"By singing you a song of ancient Ireland," Bairthre said, and proceeded at once in a fine, high tenor voice.

It wasn't quite what Mavis had in mind. But she realized that anyone so like her husband would have to be obtuse about some things.

And from the other room, she could, hear Barthold saying, "Hello, Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation? Mr. Gryns, please. Mr. Gryns? This is Everett Barthold. Something rather unfortunate seems to have happened ..."

There was consternation at the offices of the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation, and confusion, and dismay, and a swift telephoning of underwriters, when two Everett Bartholds walked in, with identical nervous little smiles.

"First case of its kind in fifteen years," said Mr. Gryns. "Oh, Lord! You will submit, of course, to a full examination?"

"Of course," said Barthold.

"Of course," said Barthold.

The doctors poked and probed them. They found differences, which they carefully listed with long Latin terms. But all the differences were within the normal variation range for temporal identicals and no amount of juggling on paper could change that. So the company psychiatrists took over.

Both men responded to all questions with careful slowness. Bairthre kept his wits about him and his nerve intact. Using his hynoed knowledge of Barthold, he answered the questions slowly but well, exactly as did Barthold.

Inter-Temporal engineers checked the time clock in the Flipper. They dismantled it and put it back together again. They examined the controls, set for Present, 1912, 1869, 1676, and 1595. 662 had also been punched—illegally—but the time clock showed that it had not been activated. Barthold explained that he had hit the control accidentally and thought it best to leave it alone.

It was suspicious, but not actionable.

A lot of power had been used, the engineers pointed out. But the time clock showed stops only to 1595. They brought the time clock back to the lab for further investigation.

The engineers then went over the interior of the Flipper inch by inch, but could find nothing incriminating. Barthold had taken the precaution of throwing the brown suitcase and its contents into the English Channel before leaving the year 662.

Mr. Gryns offered a settlement, which the two Bartholds turned down. He offered two more, which were refused. And, finally, he admitted defeat.

The last conference was held in Gryns's office. The two Bartholds sat on either side of Gryns's desk, looking slightly bored with the entire business. Gryns looked like a man whose neat and predictable world has been irrevocably upset.

"I just can't understand it," he said. "In the years you traveled in, sirs, the odds against a time flaw are something like a million to one!"

"I guess we're that one," said Barthold, and Bairthre nodded.

"But somehow it just doesn't seem—well, what's done is done. Have you gentlemen decided the question of your coexistence?"

Barthold handed Gryns the paper that Bairthre had signed in 662. "*He* is going to leave, immediately upon receipt of his compensation."

"Is this satisfactory to you, sir?" Gryns asked Bairthre.

"Sure," said Bairthre. "I don't like it here anyhow."

"*Sir?*"

"I mean," Bairthre said hastily, "what I mean is, I've always wanted to get away, you know, secret desire, live in some quiet spot, nature, simple people, all that ..."

"I see," Mr. Gryns said dubiously. "And do you feel that way, sir?" he asked, turning to Barthold.

"Certainly," Barthold asserted. "I have the same secret desires he has. But one of us has to stay—sense of duty, you know—and I've agreed to remain."

"I see," Gryns said. But his tone made it clear that he didn't see at all. "Hah. Well. Your checks are being processed now, gentlemen. A purely mechanical procedure. They can be picked up tomorrow morning—always assuming that no proofs of fraud are presented to us before then."

The atmosphere was suddenly icy. The two Bartholds said good-by to Mr. Gryns and left very quickly.

They rode the elevator down in silence. Outside the building, Bairthre said, "Sorry about that slip about not liking it here."

"*Shut up!*"

"Huh?"

Barthold seized Bairthre by the arm and dragged him into an automatic heli, taking care not to choose the first empty one he saw.

He punched for Westchester, then looked back to see if they were being followed. When he was certain they were not, he checked the interior of the heli for camera or recording devices. At last he turned to speak to Bairthre.

"You utter damned fool! That boner could have cost us a fortune!"

"I've been doing the best I can," Bairthre said sullenly. "What's wrong now? Oh, you mean they *suspect*."

"That's what's wrong! Gryns is undoubtedly having us followed. If they can find anything—anything at all to upset our claim—it could mean the Prison Planetoid."

"We'll have to watch our steps," said Bairthre soberly.

"I'm glad you realize it," Barthold said.

They dined quietly in a Westchester restaurant and had several drinks. This put them in a better frame of mind. They were feeling almost happy when they returned to Barthold's house and sent the heli back to the city.

"We will sit and play cards tonight," said Barthold, "and talk, and drink coffee, and behave as though we both were Barthold. In the morning, I'll go collect our checks."

"Good enough," Bairthre agreed. "I'll be glad to get back. I don't see how you can stand it with iron and stone all around you. Ireland, man! A king in Ireland, that's what I'll be!"

"Don't talk about it now." Barthold opened the door and they entered.

"Good evening, dear," Mavis said, looking at a point exactly midway between them.

"I thought you said you knew me," Barthold commented sourly.

"Of course I do, darling," Mavis said, turning to him with a bright smile. "I just didn't want to insult poor Mr. Bairthre."

"Thank you, kind lady," said Bairthre. "Perhaps I'll sing you another song of ancient Ireland later."

"That would be lovely, I'm sure," Mavis said. "A man telephoned you, dear. He'll call later. Honey, I've been looking at ads for scart fur. The Polar Martian Scart is a bit more expensive than plain Canal Martian Scart, but—"

"A man called?" Barthold asked. "Who?"

"He didn't say. Anyhow, it wears much better and the fur has that iridescent sheen that only—"

"Mavis! What did he want?"

"It was something about the double indemnity claim," she said. "But that's all settled, isn't it?"

"It is not settled until I have the check in my hand," Barthold told her. "Now tell me exactly what he said."

"Well, he told me he was calling about your so-called claim on the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation—"

"'So-called?' Did he say 'so-called'?"

"Those were his exact words. So-called claim on the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation. He said he had to speak to you immediately, before morning."

Barthold's face had turned gray. "Did he say he'd phone back?"

"He said he'd call in person."

"What is it?" Bairthre asked. "What does it mean? Of course—an insurance investigator!"

"That's right," Barthold said. "He must have found something."

"But what?"

"How should I know? Let me think!"

At that moment, the doorbell rang. The three Bartholds looked at each other dumbly.

The doorbell rang again. "Open up, Barthold!" a voice called. "Don't try to duck me!"

"Can we kill him?" Bairthre asked.

"Too complicated," said Barthold, after a little thought. "Come on! Out the back way!"

"But why?"

"The Flipper's parked there. We're going into the past! Don't you see? If he had proof, he'd have given it to the insurance people already. So he only suspects. He probably thinks he can trip us up with questions. If we can keep away from him until morning, we're safe!"

"What about me?" Mavis quavered.

"Stall him," Barthold said, dragging Bairthre out the back door and into the Flipper. The doorbell was jangling insistently as Barthold slammed the Flipper's door and turned to the controls.

Then he realized that the Inter-Temporal engineers had not returned his time clock.

He was lost, lost. Without the time clock, he couldn't take the Flipper anywhere. For an instant, he was in a complete state of panic. Then he regained control of himself and tried to think the problem through.

His controls were still set for Present, 1912, 1869, 1676, 1595, and 662. Therefore, even without the time clock, he could activate any of those dates manually. Flying without a time clock was a federal offense, but to hell with that.

Quickly he stabbed 1912 and worked the controls. Outside, he heard his wife shrieking. Heavy footsteps were pounding through his house.

"Stop! Stop, you!" the man was shouting.

And then Barthold was surrounded by a filmy, never-ending grayness as the Flipper speeded down the years.

Barthold parked the Flipper on the Bowery. He and Bairthre went into a saloon, ordered a nickel beer apiece, and worked on the free lunch.

"Damned nosy investigator," Barthold muttered. "Well, we've shaken him now. I'll have to pay a stiff fine for joyriding a Flipper with no time clock. But I'll be able to afford it."

"It's all moving too fast for me," said Bairthre, downing a great gulp of beer. Then he shook his head and shrugged. "I was just going to ask you how going into the past would help us collect our checks in the morning in your Present. But I realize I know the answer."

"Of course. It's the elapsed time that counts. If we can stay hidden in the past for twelve hours or so, we'll arrive in my time twelve hours later than we left. Prevents all sorts of accidents such as arriving just as you depart, or even before. Routine traffic precautions."

Bairthre munched a salami sandwich. "The hypno-learning is a little sketchy about the time trip. Where are we?"

"New York, 1912. A very interesting era."

"I just want to go home. What are those big men in blue?"

"They're policemen," Barthold said. "They seem to be looking for someone."

Two mustached policemen had entered the saloon, followed by an enormously fat man in ink-stained clothes.

"There they are!" shouted Bully Jack Barthold. "Arrest them twins, officers!"

"What is all this?" inquired Everett Barthold.

"That your jalopy outside?" one of the policemen asked.

"Yes, sir, but—"

"That clinches it, then. Man's got a warrant out for you two. Said you'd have a shiny new jalopy. Offering a nice reward, too."

"The guy came straight to me," said Bully Jack. "I told him I'd be real *happy* to help—though I'd rather take a poke at him, the lousy, insinuating, dirty—"

"Officers," Barthold pleaded, "we haven't done anything!"

"Then you got nothing to fear. Come along quiet now."

Barthold plunged suddenly past the policemen, shoved Bully Jack in the face, and was in the street. Bairthre, who had been considering the same thing, stomped hard on one policeman's foot, jabbed another in the stomach, rammed Bully Jack out of his way and followed on Barthold's heels.

They leaped into the Flipper and Barthold jabbed for 1869.

They concealed the Flipper as well as they could, in a back street livery stable, and walked to a little park nearby. They opened their shirts to the warm Memphis sunlight and lay back on the grass.

"That investigator must have a supercharged time job," Barthold said. "That's why he's reaching our stops before us."

"How does he know where we're going?" Bairthre asked.

"Our stops are a matter of company record. He knows we haven't got a time clock, so these are the only places we can reach."

"Then we aren't safe here," said Bairthre. "He's probably looking for us."

"Probably he is," Barthold said wearily. "But he hasn't caught us yet. Just a few more hours and we're safe! It'll be morning in the Present, and the check will have gone through."

"Is that a fact, gentlemen?" a suave voice inquired.

Barthold looked up and saw Ben Bartholder standing before him, a small derringer balanced in his good left hand.

"So he offered you the reward, too!" Barthold said.

"He did, indeed. And a most tempting offer, let me say. But I'm not interested in it."

"You're not?" Bairthre said.

"No. I'm interested in only one thing. I want to know *which of you walked out on me last night in the saloon*."

Barthold and Bairthre stared at each other, then back at Ben Bartholder.

"I want that one," Bartholder said. "Nobody insults Ben Bartholder. Even with one hand, I'm as good a man as any! I want that man. The other can go."

Barthold and Bairthre stood up. Bartholder stepped back in order to cover them both.

"Which is it, gents? I don't possess a whole lot of patience."

He stood before them, weaving slightly, looking as mean and efficient as a rattlesnake. Barthold decided that the derringer was too far away for a rush. It probably had a hair-trigger, anyhow.

"Speak up!" Bartholder said sharply. "Which of you is it?"

Thinking desperately, Barthold wondered why Ben Bartholder hadn't fired yet, why he hadn't simply killed them both.

Then he figured it out and immediately knew his only course of action.

"Everett," he said.

"Yes, Everett?" said Bairthre.

"We're going to turn around together now and walk back to the Flipper."

"But the gun—"

"He won't shoot. Are you with me?"

"With you," Bairthre said through clenched teeth.

They turned like soldiers in a march, and began to pace slowly back toward the livery stable.

"Stop!" Ben Bartholder cried. "Stop or I'll shoot you both!"

"No, you won't!" Barthold shouted back. They were in the street now, approaching the livery stable.

"No? You think I don't dare?"

"It isn't that," Barthold said, walking toward the Flipper. "You're just not the type to shoot down a perfectly innocent man. And one of us is innocent!"

Slowly, carefully, Bairthre opened the Flipper's door.

"I don't care!" Bartholder yelled. "Which one? Speak up, you miserable coward! Which one? I'll give you a fair fight. Speak up or I'll shoot you both here and now!"

"And what would the boys say?" Barthold scoffed. "They'd say that the one-handed man lost his nerve and killed two unarmed strangers!"

Ben Bartholder's iron gun hand sagged.

"Quick, get in," Barthold whispered.

They scrambled in and slammed the door. Bartholder put the derringer away.

"All right, mister," Ben Bartholder said. "You been here twice, and I think you'll be here a third time. I'll wait around. The next time I'll get you."

He turned and walked away.

They had to get out of Memphis. But where could they go? Barthold wouldn't consider Konigsberg, 1676, and the Black Death. London, 1595, was filled with Tom Barthal's criminal friends, any of whom would cheerfully cut Barthold's throat for treachery.

"We'll go all the way back," Bairthre said. "To Maiden's Castle."

"And if he comes there?"

"He won't. It's against the law to go past the thousand-year limit. And would an insurance man break the law?"

"He might not," Barthold said thoughtfully. "He just might not. It's worth a try."

And again he activated the Flipper.

They slept in an open field that night, a mile from the fortress of Maiden's Castle. They stayed beside the Flipper and took turns at sentry duty. And finally the sun rose, warm and yellow, above the green fields.

"He didn't come," Bairthre said.

"What?" Barthold asked, waking with a start.

"Snap out of it, man! We're safe. Is it morning yet in your Present?"

"It's morning," Barthold said, rubbing his eyes.

"Then we've won and I'll be a king in Ireland!"

"Yes, we've won," Barthold said. "Victory at last is—damn!"

"What's the matter?"

"That investigator! Look over there!"

Bairthre stared across the fields, muttering, "I don't see a thing. Are you sure—"

Barthold struck him across the back of the skull with a stone. He had picked it up during the night and saved it for this purpose.

He bent over and felt Bairthre's pulse. The Irishman still lived but would be unconscious for a few hours. When he recovered, he would be alone and kingdomless.

Too bad, Barthold thought. But under the circumstances, it would be risky to bring Bairthre back with him. How much easier it would be to walk up to Inter-Temporal himself and collect a check for Everett Barthold. Then return in half an hour and collect another check for Everett Barthold.

And how much more profitable it would be!

He climbed into the Flipper and looked once more at his unconscious kinsman. What a shame, he thought, that he will never be a king in Ireland.

But then, he thought, history would probably find it confusing if he had succeeded.

He activated the controls, headed straight for the Present.

He reappeared in the back yard of his house. Quickly he bounded up the steps and pounded on the door.

"Who's there?" Mavis called.

"Me!" Barthold shouted. "It's all right, Mavis—everything has worked out fine!"

"Who?" Mavis opened the door, stared at him, and let out a shriek.

"Calm down," Barthold said. "I know it's been a strain, but it's all over now. I'm going for the check and then we'll—"

He stopped. A man had just appeared in the doorway beside Mavis. He was a short man, beginning to bald, his features ordinary, and his eyes were mild behind horn-rimmed glasses.

It was himself.

"Oh, no!" Barthold groaned.

"Oh, yes," his double said. "One cannot venture beyond the thousand-year barrier with impunity, Everett. Sometimes there *is* a sound reason for a law. I am your time-identical."

Barthold stared at the Barthold in the doorway. He said, "I was chased—"

"By me," his double told him. "In disguise, of course, since you have a few enemies in time. You imbecile, why did you run?"

"I thought you were an investigator. Why were you chasing me?"

"For one reason and one reason only."

"What was that?"

"We could have been rich beyond our wildest dreams," his double said, "if only you hadn't been so guilty and frightened! The three of us—you, Bairthre, and me—could have gone to Inter-Temporal and claimed *triple indemnity*!"

"Triple indemnity!" Barthold breathed. "I never thought of it."

"The sum would have been staggering. It would have been infinitely more than for double indemnity. You disgust me."

"Well," Barthold said, "what's done is done. At least we can collect for double indemnity, then decide—"

"I collected both checks and signed the release forms for you. You weren't here, you know."

"In that case, I'd like my share."

"Don't be ridiculous," his double told him.

"But it's mine! I'll go to Inter-Temporal and tell them—"

"They won't listen. I've waived all your rights. You can't even stay in the Present, Everett."

"Don't do this to me!" Barthold begged.

"Why not? Look at what you did to Bairthre."

"Damn it, *you* can't judge me!" Barthold cried. "*You're me!*"

"Who else is there to judge you except yourself?" his double asked him.

Barthold couldn't cope with that. He turned to Mavis.

"Darling," he said, "you always told me you'd know your own husband. Don't you know me now?"

Mavis moved back into the house. As she went, Barthold noticed the flash of ruumstones around her neck and asked no more.

Barthold and Barthold stood face to face. The double raised his arm. A police heli, hovering low, dropped to the ground. Three policemen piled out.

"This is what I was afraid of, officers," the double said. "My double collected his check this morning, as you know. He waived his rights and went into the past. I was afraid he'd return and try for more."

"He won't bother you again, sir," a policeman said. He turned to Barthold. "You! Climb back in that Flipper and get out of the Present. The next time we see you, we shoot!"

Barthold knew when he was beaten. Very humbly, he said, "I'll gladly go, officers. But my Flipper needs repairs. It doesn't have a time clock."

"You should have thought about that before signing the waiver," the policeman said. "Get moving!"

"Please!" Barthold said.

"No," Barthold answered.

No mercy. And Barthold knew that, in his double's place, he would have said exactly the same thing.

He climbed into the Flipper and closed the door. Numbly he contemplated his choices, if they could be called that.

New York, 1912, with its maddening reminders of his own time and with Bully Jack Barthold? Or Memphis, 1869, with Ben Bartholder awaiting his third visit? Or Konigsberg, 1676, with the grinning, vacant face of Hans Baerthaler for company, and the Black Death? Or London, 1595, with Tom Barthal's cutthroat friends searching the streets for him? Or Maiden's Castle, 662, with an angry Connor Lough mac Bairthre waiting to even the score?

It really didn't matter. This time, he thought, let the place pick me.

He closed his eyes and blindly stabbed a button.

HOLDOUT

THE CREW of a spaceship must be friends. They must live harmoniously in order to achieve the split-second interaction that becomes necessary from time to time. In space, one mistake is usually enough.

It is axiomatic that even the best ships have their accidents; the mediocre ones don't survive.

Knowing this, it can be understood how Captain Sven felt when, four hours before blastoff, he was told that radioman Forbes would not serve with the new replacement.

Forbes hadn't met the new replacement yet, and didn't want to. Hearing about him was enough. There was nothing personal in this, Forbes explained. His refusal was on purely racial grounds.

"Are you sure of this?" Captain Sven asked, when his chief engineer came to the bridge with the news.

"Absolutely certain, sir," said engineer Hao. He was a small, flat-faced, yellow-skinned man from Canton. "We tried to handle it ourselves. But Forbes wouldn't budge."

Captain Sven sat down heavily in his padded chair. He was deeply shocked. He had considered racial hatred a thing of the remote past. He was as astonished at a real-life example of it as he would have been to encounter a dodo, a moa, or a mosquito.

"Racialism in this day and age!" Sven said. "Really, it's too preposterous. It's like telling me they're burning heretics in the village square, or threatening warfare with cobalt bombs."

"There wasn't a hint of it earlier," said Hao. "It came as a complete surprise."

"You're the oldest man on the ship," Sven said. "Have you tried reasoning him out of this attitude?"

"I've talked to him for hours," Hao said. "I pointed out that for centuries we Chinese hated the Japanese, and vice versa. If we could overcome our antipathy for the sake of the Great Cooperation, why couldn't he?"

"Did it do any good?"

"Not a bit. He said it just wasn't the same thing."

Sven bit off the end of a cigar with a vicious gesture, lighted it, and puffed for a moment. "Well, I'm damned if I'll have anything like this on *my* ship. I'll get another radioman!"

"That won't be too easy, sir," Hao said. "Not here."

Sven frowned thoughtfully. They were on Discaya II, a small outpost planet in the Southern Star Reaches. Here they had unloaded a cargo of machine parts, and taken on the Company-assigned replacement who was the innocent source of all the trouble. Discaya had plenty of trained men, but they were all specialists in hydraulics, mining, and allied fields. The planet's single radio operator was happy where he was, had a wife and children on Discaya, owned a house in a pleasant suburb, and would never consider leaving.

"Ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous," Sven said. "I can't spare Forbes, and I'll not leave the new man behind. It wouldn't be fair. Besides, the Company would probably fire me. And rightly, rightly. A captain should be able to handle trouble aboard his own ship."

Hao nodded glumly.

"Where is this Forbes from?"

"A farm near an isolated village in the mountain country of the Southern United States. Georgia, sir. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"I think so," said Sven, who had taken a course in Regional Characteristics at Uppsala, to better fit himself for the job of captain. "Georgia produces peanuts and hogs."

"And men," Hao added. "Strong, capable men. You'll find Georgians working on all frontiers, out of all proportions to their actual numbers. Their reputation is unexcelled."

"I know all this," Sven grumbled. "And Forbes is an excellent man. But this racialism—"

"Forbes can't be considered typical," Hao said. "He was raised in a small, isolated community, far from the mainstream of American life. Similar communities all over the world develop and cling to strange folkways. I remember a village in Honan where—"

"I still find it hard to believe," Sven said, interrupting what promised to be a long dissertation on Chinese country life. "And there's simply no excuse for it. Every community everywhere has a heritage of some sort of racial feeling. But it's every individual's responsibility to rid himself of that when he enters the mainstream of Terran life. Others have. Why not Forbes? Why must he inflict his problems on us? Wasn't he taught anything about the Great Cooperation?"

Hao shrugged his shoulders. "Would you care to speak to him, Captain?"

"Yes. Wait, I'll speak to Angka first."

The chief engineer left the bridge. Sven remained deep in thought until he heard a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Angka entered. He was cargo foreman, a tall, splendidly proportioned man with skin the color of a ripe plum. He was a full-blooded Negro from Ghana, and a first-class guitar player.

"I assume," Sven said, "you know all about the trouble."

"It's unfortunate, sir," Angka said.

"Unfortunate? It's downright catastrophic! You know the risk involved in taking the ship up in this condition. I'm supposed to blast off in less than three hours. We can't sail without a radioman, and we need the replacement, too."

Angka stood impassively, waiting.

Sven flicked an inch of white ash from his cigar. "Now look, Angka, you must know why I called you here."

"I can guess, sir," Angka said, grinning.

"You're Forbes's best friend. Can't you do something with him?"

"I've tried, Captain, Lord knows I've tried. But you know Georgians."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Good men, sir, but stubborn as mules. Once they've made up their minds, that's it. I've been talking to Forbes for two days about this. I got him drunk last night—strictly in line of duty, sir," Angka added hastily.

"It's all right. Go on."

"And I talked to him like I'd talk to my own son. Reminded him how good the crew got along. All the fun we'd had in all the ports. How good the Cooperation felt. Now look, Jimmy, I said to him, you keep on like this, you kill all that. You don't want that, do you, I asked him. He bawled like a baby, sir."

"But he wouldn't change his mind?"

"Said he *couldn't*. Told me I might as well quit trying. There was one and only one race in this galaxy he wouldn't serve with, and there was no sense talking about it. Said his pappy would spin in his grave if he were to do so."

"Is there any chance he'll change his mind?" Sven asked.

"I'll go on trying, but I don't think there's a chance."

He left. Captain Sven sat, his jaw cradled in one big hand. He glanced again at the ship's chronometer. Less than three hours before blastoff!

He lifted the receiver of the intercom and asked for a direct line to the spacefield tower. When he was in contact with the officer in charge he said, "I'd like to request permission to stay a few days longer."

"Wish I could grant it, Captain Sven," the officer said. "But we need the pit. We can only handle one interstellar ship at a time here. An ore boat from Calayo is due in five hours. They'll probably be short of fuel."

"They always are," Sven said.

"Tell you what we can do. If it's a serious mechanical difficulty, we could find a couple cranes, lower your ship to horizontal, and drag it off the field. Might be quite a while before we could set it up again, though."

"Thanks, but never mind. I'll blast on schedule." He signed off. He couldn't allow his ship to become laid up like that. The Company would have his hide, not a doubt about it.

But there *was* a course of action he could take. An unpleasant one, but necessary. He got to his feet, discarded the dead cigar stump, and marched out of the bridge.

He came to the ship's infirmary. The doctor, in his white coat, was seated with his feet on a desk, reading a three-month-old German medical journal.

"Welcome, Cap. Care for a shot of strictly medicinal brandy?"

"I could use it," Sven said.

The young doctor poured out two healthy doses from a bottle marked *Swamp Fever Culture*.

"Why the label?" Sven asked.

"Discourages the men from sampling. They have to steal the cook's lemon extract." The doctor's name was Yitzhak Vilkin. He was an Israeli, a graduate of the new medical school at Beersheba.

"You know about the Forbes problem?" Sven asked.

"Everybody does."

"I wanted to ask you, in your capacity as medical officer aboard this ship: Have you ever observed any previous indications of racial hatred in Forbes?"

"Not one," Vilkin answered promptly.

"Are you sure?"

"Israelis are good at sensing that sort of thing. I assure you, it caught me completely by surprise. I've had some lengthy interviews with Forbes since, of course."

"Any conclusions?"

"He's honest, capable, straightforward, and slightly simple. He possesses some antiquated attitudes in the form of ancient traditions. The Mountain-Georgians, you know, have a considerable body of such customs. They've been much studied by anthropologists from Samoa and Fiji. Haven't you read *Coming of Age in Georgia?* Or *Folkways of Mountain-Georgia?*"

"I don't have time for such things," Sven said. "My time is pretty well occupied running this ship without me having to read up on the individual psychology of the entire crew."

"I suppose so, Cap," the doctor said. "Well, those books are in the ship's library, if you'd care to glance at them. I don't see how I can help you. Re-education takes time. I'm a medical officer anyhow, not a psychologist. The plain fact is this: There is one race that Forbes will not serve with, one race which causes him to enact all his ancient racial hostilities. Your new man, by some mischance, happens to be from that race."

"I'm leaving Forbes behind," Sven said abruptly. "The communications officer can learn how to handle the radio. Forbes can take the next ship back to Georgia."

"I wouldn't recommend that."

"Why not?"

"Forbes is very popular with the crew. They think he's damned unreasonable, but they wouldn't be happy sailing without him."

"*More* disharmony," Sven mused. "Dangerous, very dangerous. But damn it, I can't leave the new man behind. I won't. It isn't fair! Who runs this ship, me or Forbes?"

"A very interesting question," Vilkin observed, and ducked quickly as the irate captain hurled his glass at him.

Captain Sven went to the ship's library, where he glanced over *Coming of Age in Georgia* and *Folkways of Mountain-Georgia*. They didn't seen to help much. He thought for a moment, and glanced at his watch. Two hours to blastoff! He hurried to the Navigation Room.

Within the room was Ks'rat. A native of Venus, Ks'rat was perched on a stool inspecting the auxiliary navigating instruments. He was gripping a sextant in three hands, and was polishing the mirrors with his foot, his most dexterous member. When Sven walked in the Venusian turned orange-brown to show his respect for authority, then returned to his habitual green.

"How's everything?" Sven asked.

"Fine," said Ks'rat. "Except for the Forbes problem, of course." He was using a manual soundbox, since Venusians had no vocal cords. At first, these sound boxes had been harsh and metallic; but the Venusians had modified them until now, the typical Venusian "voice" was a soft, velvety murmur.

"Forbes is what I came to see you about," said Sven. "You're non-Terran. As a matter of fact, you're nonhuman. I thought perhaps you could throw a new light on the problem. Something I may have overlooked."

Ks'rat pondered, then turned gray, his "uncertain" color. "I'm afraid I can't help much, Captain Sven. We never had any racial problems on Venus. Although you might consider the *sclarda* situation a parallel—"

"Not really," Sven said. "That was more a religious problem."

"Then I have no further ideas. Have you tried reasoning with the man?"

"Everyone else has."

"You might have better luck, Captain. As an authority symbol, you might tend to supplant the father symbol within him. With that advantage, try to make him aware of the true basis for his emotional reaction."

"There *is* no basis for racial hatred."

"Perhaps not in terms of abstract logic. But in human terms, you might find an answer and a key. Try to discover what Forbes fears. Perhaps if you can put him in better reality-contact with his own motives, he'll come around."

"I'll bear all that in mind," said Sven, with a sarcasm that was lost on the Venusian.

The intercom sounded the captain's signal. It was the first mate. "Captain! Tower wants to know whether you're blasting on schedule."

"I am," Sven said. "Secure the ship." He put down the phone.

Ks'rat turned a bright red. It was the Venusian equivalent of a raised eyebrow.

"I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't," Sven said. "Thanks for your advice. I'm going to talk to Forbes now."

"By the way," Ks'rat said, "of what race is the man?"

"What man?"

"The new man that Forbes won't serve with."

"How the hell should I know?" shouted Sven, his temper suddenly snapping. "Do you think I sit on the bridge inspecting a man's racial background?"

"It might make a difference."

"Why should it? Perhaps it's a Mongolian that Forbes won't serve with, or a Pakistani, or a New Yorker or a Martian. What do I care what race his diseased, impoverished little mind picks on?"

"Good luck, Captain Sven," Ks'rat said as Sven hurried out.

James Forbes saluted when he entered the bridge, though it was not customary aboard Sven's ship. The radioman stood at full attention. He was a tall, slender youth, tow-headed, light-skinned, freckled. Everything about him looked pliant, malleable, complaisant. Everything except his eyes, which were dark blue and very steady.

Sven didn't know how to begin. But Forbes spoke first.

"Sir," he said, "I want you to know I'm mighty well ashamed of myself. You've been a good Captain, sir, the very best, and this has been a happy ship. I feel like a worthless no-account for doing this."

"Then you'll reconsider?" asked Sven, with a faint glimmer of hope.

"I wish I could, I really do. I'd give my right arm for you, Cap'n, or anything else I possess."

"I don't want your right arm. I merely want you to serve with the new man."

"That's the one thing I can't do," Forbes said sadly.

"Why in hell can't you?" Sven roared, forgetting his determination to use psychology.

"You just don't understand us Georgia mountain boys," Forbes said. "That's how my pappy, bless his memory, raised me. That poor little old man would spin in his grave if I went against his dying wish."

Sven stifled a curse and said, "You know the situation that leaves me in, Forbes. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Only one thing to do, sir. Angka and me'll leave the ship. You'll be better off short-handed than with an uncooperative crew, sir."

"Angka is leaving with you? Wait a minute! Who's *he* prejudiced against?"

"No one, sir. But him and me's been shipmates for close to five years now, ever since we met on the freighter *Stella*. Where one goes, the other goes."

A red light flickered on Sven's control board, indicating the ship's readiness for blastoff. Sven ignored it.

"I can't have both of you leaving the ship," Sven said. "Forbes, why won't you serve with the new man?"

"Racial reasons, sir," Forbes said tightly.

"Now listen closely. You have been serving under me, a Swede. Has that disturbed you?"

"Not at all, sir."

"The medical officer is an Israeli. The navigator is a Venusian. The engineer is Chinese. There are Russians, New Yorkers, Melanasians, Africans, and everything else in this crew. Men of all races, creeds, and colors. You have served with them."

"Of course I have. From earliest childhood us Mountain-Georgians expect to serve with all different races. It's our heritage. My pappy taught me that. But I will not serve with Blake."

"Who's Blake?"

"The new man, sir."

"Where's he from?" Sven asked wearily.

"Mountain-Georgia."

For a moment, Sven thought he hadn't heard right. He stared at Forbes, who stared nervously back.

"From the mountain country of Georgia?"

"Yes, sir. Not too far, I believe, from where I was born."

"This man Blake, is he white?"

"Of course, sir. White English-Scottish ancestry, same as me."

Sven had the sensation of discovering a new world, a world no civilized man had ever encountered. He was amazed to discover that weirder customs could be found on Earth than anywhere else in the galaxy.

He said to Forbes, "Tell me about the custom."

"I thought *everybody* knew about us Mountain-Georgians, sir. In the section I come from, we leave home at the age of sixteen and we don't come back. Our customs teach us to work with any race, live with any race ... except our own."

"Oh," said Sven.

"This new man Blake is a white Mountain-Georgian. He should have looked over the roster and not signed for this ship. It's all his fault, really, and if he chooses to overlook the custom, I can't help that."

"But *why* won't you serve with your own kind?" Sven asked.

"No one knows, sir. It's been handed down from father to son for hundreds of years, ever since the Hydrogen War."

Sven stared at him closely, ideas beginning to form. "Forbes, have you ever had any ... feeling about Negroes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Describe it."

"Well, sir, we Mountain-Georgians hold that the Negro is the white man's natural friend. I mean to say, whites can get along fine with Chinese and Martians and such, but there's something special about black and white—"

"Go on," Sven urged.

"Hard to explain it good, sir. It's just that—well, the qualities of the two seem to mesh, like good gears. There's a special understanding between black and white."

"Did you know," Sven said gently, "that once, long ago, your ancestors felt that the Negro was a lesser human being? That they created laws to keep him from interacting with whites? And that they kept on doing this long after the rest of the world had conquered its prejudices? That they kept on doing it, in fact, right up to the Hydrogen War?"

"That's a lie, sir!" Forbes shouted. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to call you a liar, sir, but it just isn't true. Us Georgians have always—"

"I can prove it to you in history books and anthropological studies. I have several in the ship's library, if you'd care to look!"

"Yankee books!"

"I'll show you Southern books, too. It's true, Forbes, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. Education is a long, slow process. You have a great deal to be proud of in your ancestry."

"*If* this is true," Forbes said, very hesitantly, "then what happened?"

"It's in the anthropology book. You know, don't you, that Georgia was hit during the war by a hydrogen bomb meant for Norfolk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps you didn't know that the bomb fell in the middle of the so-called Black Belt. Many whites were killed. But almost the entire Negro population of that section of Georgia was wiped out."

"I didn't know that."

"Now, you must take my word that there had been race riots before the Hydrogen War, and lynchings, and a lot of bad feeling between white and black. Suddenly the Negroes were gone—dead. This created a considerable feeling of guilt among the whites, particularly in isolated communities. Some of the more superstitious whites believed that they had been spiritually responsible for this wholesale obliteration. And it hit them hard, for they were religious men."

"What would that matter, if they hated the Negroes?"

"They didn't, that's the whole point! They feared intermarriage, economic competition, a change of hierarchy. But they didn't *hate* the Negroes. Quite the contrary. They always maintained, with considerable truth, that they liked the Negroes better than the 'liberal' Northerners did. It set up quite a conflict."

Forbes nodded, thinking hard.

"In an isolated community like yours, it gave rise to the custom of working away from home, with any race except their own. Guilt was at the bottom of it all."

Perspiration rolled down Forbes's freckled cheeks. "I can't believe it," he said.

"Forbes, have I ever lied to you?"

"No, sir."

"Will you believe me, then, when I swear to you that this is true?"

"I—I'll try, Captain Sven."

"Now you know the reason for the custom. Will you work with Blake?"

"I don't know if I can."

"Will you try?"

Forbes bit his lip and squirmed uncomfortably. "Captain, I'll try. I don't know if I can, but I'll try. And I'm doing it for you and the men, not on account of what you said."

"Just try," Sven said. "That's all I ask of you."

Forbes nodded and hurriedly left the bridge. Sven immediately signaled the tower that he was preparing for blastoff.

Down in the crew's quarters, Forbes was introduced to the new man, Blake. The replacement was tall, black-haired, and obviously ill at ease.

"Howdy," said Blake.

"Howdy," said Forbes. Each made a tentative gesture toward a handshake, but didn't follow it through.

"I'm from near Pompey," said Forbes.

"I'm from Almira."

"Practically next door," Forbes said unhappily.

"Yeah, afraid so," Blake said.

They eyed each other in silence. After a long moment, Forbes groaned, "I can't do it, I just can't." He began to walk away.

"Suddenly he stopped, turned and blurted out, "You all white?"

"Can't say as how I am," Blake replied. "I'm one-eighth Cherokee on my mother's side."

"Cherokee, huh?"

"That's right."

"Well, man, why didn't you say so in the first place. Knew a Cherokee from Altahatchie once, name of Tom Little Sitting Bear. Don't suppose you're kin to him?"

"Don't believe so," Blake said. "Never knew no Cherokees, myself."

"Well, it don't make no never-mind. They shoulda told me in the first place you was a Cherokee. Come on, I'll show you your bunk."

When the incident was reported to Captain Sven, several hours after blastoff, he was completely perplexed. How, he asked himself, could one-eighth Cherokee blood make a man a Cherokee? Wasn't the other seven-eighths more indicative?

He decided he didn't understand American Southerners at all.

THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

JEFFERSON Toms went into an auto-café one afternoon after classes, to drink coffee and study. He sat down, philosophy texts piled neatly before him, and saw a girl directing the robot waiters. She had smoky-gray eyes and hair the color of a rocket exhaust. Her figure was slight but sweetly curved and, gazing at it, Toms felt a lump in his throat and a sudden recollection of autumn, evening, rain, and candlelight.

This was how love came to Jefferson Toms. Although he was ordinarily a very reserved young man, he complained about the robot service in order to meet her. When they did meet, he was inarticulate, overwhelmed by feeling. Somehow, though, he managed to ask her for a date.

The girl, whose name was Doris, was strangely moved by the stocky, black-haired young student, for she accepted at once. And then Jefferson Toms's troubles began.

He found love delightful, yet extremely disturbing, in spite of his advanced studies in philosophy. But love was a confusing thing even in Toms's age, when spaceliners bridged the gaps between the worlds, disease lay dead, war was inconceivable, and just about anything of any importance had been solved in an exemplary manner.

Old Earth was in better shape than ever before. Her cities were bright with plastic and stainless steel. Her remaining forests were carefully tended bits of greenery where one might picnic in perfect safety, since all beasts and insects had been removed to sanitary zoos which reproduced their living conditions with admirable skill.

Even the climate of Earth had been mastered. Farmers received their quota of rain between three and three-thirty in the morning, people gathered at stadiums to watch a program of sunsets, and a tornado was produced once a year in a special arena as part of the World Peace Day Celebration.

But love was as confusing as ever, and Toms found this distressing.

He simply could not put his feelings into words. Such expressions as "I love you," "I adore you," "I'm crazy about you" were overworked and inadequate. They conveyed nothing of the depth and fervor of his emotions. Indeed they cheapened them, since every stereo, every second-rate play was filled with similar words. People used them in casual conversation and spoke of how much they *loved* pork chops, *adored* sunsets, were *crazy about* tennis.

Every fiber of Toms's being revolted against this. Never, he swore, would he speak of his love in terms used for pork chops. But he found, to his dismay, that he had nothing better to say.

He brought the problem to his philosophy professor. "Mr. Toms," the professor said, gesturing wearily with his glasses, "ah—*love*, as it is commonly called, is not an operational area with us as yet. No significant work has been done in this field, aside from the so-called Language of Love of the Tyanian race."

This was no help. Toms continued to muse on love and think lengthily of Doris. In the long haunted evenings on her porch when the shadows from the trellis vines crossed her face, revealing and concealing it, Toms struggled to tell her what he felt. And since he could not bring himself to use the weary commonplaces of love, he tried to express himself in extravagances.

"I feel about you," he would say, "the way a star feels about its planet."

"How immense!" she would answer, immensely flattered at being compared to anything so cosmic.

"That's not what I meant," Toms amended. "The feeling I was trying to express was more—well,

for example, when you walk, I am reminded of—"

"Of a what?"

"A doe in a forest glade," Toms said, frowning.

"How charming!"

"It wasn't intended to be charming. I was trying to express the awkwardness inherent in youth and yet—"

"But, honey," she said. "I'm not awkward. My dancing teacher—"

"I didn't mean *awkward*. But the essence of awkwardness is—is—"

"I understand," she said.

But Toms knew she didn't.

So he was forced to give up extravagances. Soon he found himself unable to say anything of any importance to Doris, for it was not what he meant, nor even close to it.

The girl became concerned at the long, moody silences which developed between them.

"Jeff," she would urge, "surely you can say *something*!"

Toms shrugged his shoulders.

"Even if it isn't absolutely what you mean."

Toms sighed.

"Please," she cried, "say anything at all! I can't stand this!"

"Oh, hell—"

"Yes?" she breathed, her face transfigured.

"That wasn't what I meant," Toms said, relapsing into his gloomy silence.

At last he asked her to marry him. He was willing to admit that he "loved" her—but he refused to expand on it. He explained that a marriage must be founded upon truth or it is doomed from the start. If he cheapened and falsified his emotions at the beginning, what could the future hold for them?

Doris found his sentiments admirable, but refused to marry him.

"You must *tell* a girl that you love her," she declared. "You have to tell her a hundred times a day, Jefferson, and even then it's not enough."

"But I do love you!" Toms protested. "I mean to say I have an emotion corresponding to—"

"Oh, stop it!"

In this predicament, Toms thought about the Language of Love and went to his professor's office to ask about it.

"We are told," his professor said, "that the race indigenous to Tyana II had a specific and unique language for the expression of sensations of love. To say 'I love you' was unthinkable for Tyanians. They would use a phrase denoting the exact kind and class of love they felt at that specific moment, and used for no other purpose."

Toms nodded, and the professor continued. "Of course, developed with this language was, necessarily, a technique of love-making quite incredible in its perfection. We are told that it made all ordinary techniques seem like the clumsy pawing of a grizzly in heat." The professor coughed in embarrassment.

"It is precisely what I need!" Toms exclaimed.

"Ridiculous," said the professor. "The technique might be interesting, but your own is doubtless sufficient for most needs. And the language, by its very nature, can be used with only one person. To learn it impresses me as wasted energy."

"Labor for love," Toms said, "is the most worthwhile work in the world, since it produces a rich harvest of feeling."

"I refuse to stand here and listen to bad epigrams. Mr. Toms, why all this fuss about love?"

"It is the only perfect thing in this world," Toms answered fervently. "If one must learn a special language to appreciate it, one can do no less. Tell me, is it far to Tyana II?"

"A considerable distance," his professor said, with a thin smile. "And an unrewarding one, since the race is extinct."

"Extinct! But why? A sudden pestilence? An invasion?"

"It is one of the mysteries of the galaxy," his professor said somberly.

"Then the language is lost!"

"Not quite. Twenty years ago, an Earthman named George Varris went to Tyana and learned the Language of Love from the last remnants of the race." The professor shrugged his shoulders. "I never considered it sufficiently important to read his scientific papers."

Toms looked up Varris in the *Interspatial Explorers Who's Who* and found that he was credited with the discovery of Tyana, had wandered around the frontier planets for a time, but at last had returned to deserted Tyana, to devote his life to investigating every aspect of its culture.

After learning this, Toms thought long and hard. The journey to Tyana was a difficult one, time-consuming, and expensive. Perhaps Varris would be dead before he got there, or unwilling to teach him the language. Was it worth the gamble?

"Is *love* worth it?" Toms asked himself, and knew the answer.

So he sold his ultra-fi, his memory recorder, his philosophy texts, and several stocks his grandfather had left him, and booked passage to Cranthis IV, which was the closest he could come to Tyana on a scheduled spaceway. And after all his preparations had been made, he went to Doris.

"When I return," he said, "I will be able to tell you exactly how much—I mean the particular quality and class of—I mean, Doris, when I have mastered the Tyanian Technique, you will be loved as no woman has ever been loved!"

"Do you mean that?" she asked, her eyes glowing.

"Well," Toms said, "the term 'loved,' doesn't quite express it. But I mean something very much like it."

"I will wait for you, Jeff," she said. "But—please don't be too long."

Jefferson Toms nodded, blinked back his tears, clutched Doris inarticulately, and hurried to the spaceport.

Within the hour, he was on his way.

Four months later, after considerable difficulties, Toms stood on Tyana, on the outskirts of the capital city. Slowly he walked down the broad, deserted main thoroughfare. On either side of him, noble buildings soared to dizzy heights. Peering inside one, Toms saw complex machinery and gleaming switchboards. With his pocket Tyana-English dictionary, he was able to translate the lettering above one of the buildings.

It read: COUNSELING SERVICES FOR STAGE-FOUR LOVE PROBLEMS.

Other buildings were much the same, filled with calculating machinery, switchboards, ticker tapes, and the like. He passed THE INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH INTO AFFECTION DELAY, stared at the two-hundred-story HOME FOR THE EMOTIONALLY RETARDED, and glanced at several others. Slowly the awesome, dazzling truth dawned upon him.

Here was an entire city given over to the research and aid of love.

He had no time for further speculation. In front of him was the gigantic GENERAL LOVE SERVICES BUILDING. And out of its marble hallway stepped an old man.

"Who the hell are you?" the old man asked.

"I am Jefferson Toms, of Earth. I have come here to learn the Language of Love, Mr. Varris."

Varris raised his shaggy white eyebrows. He was a small, wrinkled old man, stoop-shouldered and shaky in the knees. But his eyes were alert and filled with a cold suspicion.

"Perhaps you think the language will make you more attractive to women," Varris said. "Don't believe it, young man. Knowledge has its advantages, of course. But it has distinct drawbacks, as the Tyanians discovered."

"What drawbacks?" Toms asked.

Varris grinned, displaying a single yellow tooth. "You wouldn't understand, if you don't already know. It takes knowledge to understand the limitations of knowledge."

"Nevertheless," Toms said, "I want to learn the language."

Varris stared at him thoughtfully. "But it is not a simple thing, Toms. The Language of Love, and its resultant technique, is every bit as complex as brain surgery or the practice of corporation law. It takes work, much work, and a talent as well."

"I will do the work. And I'm sure I have the talent."

"Most people think that," Varris said, "and most of them are mistaken. But never mind, never mind. It's been a long time since I've had any company. We'll see how you get on, Toms."

Together they went into the General Services Building, which Varris called his home. They went to the Main Control Room, where the old man had put down a sleeping bag and set up a camp stove. There, in the shadow of the giant calculators, Toms's lessons began.

Varris was a thorough teacher. In the beginning, with the aid of a portable Semantic Differentiator, he taught Toms to isolate the delicate apprehension one feels in the presence of a to-be-loved person, to detect the subtle tensions that come into being as the potentiality of love draws near.

These sensations, Toms learned, must never be spoken of directly, for frankness frightens love. They must be expressed in simile, metaphor, and hyperbole, half-truths and white lies. With these, one creates an atmosphere and lays a foundation for love. And the mind, deceived by its own predisposition, thinks of booming surf and raging sea, mournful black rocks and fields of green corn.

"Nice images," Toms said admiringly.

"Those were samples," Varris told him. "Now you must learn them all."

So Toms went to work memorizing great long lists of natural wonders, to what sensations they were comparable, and at what stage they appeared in the anticipation of love. The language was thorough in this regard. Every state or object in nature for which there was a response in love-anticipation had been catalogued, classified, and listed with suitable modifying adjectives.

When he had memorized the list, Varris drilled him in perceptions of love. Toms learned the small, strange things that make up a state of love. Some were so ridiculous that he had to laugh.

The old man admonished him sternly. "Love is a serious business, Toms. You seem to find some humor in the fact that love is frequently predisposed by wind speed and direction."

"It seems foolish," Toms admitted.

"There are stranger things than that," Varris said, and mentioned another factor.

Toms shuddered. "*That* I can't believe. It's preposterous. Everyone knows—"

"If everyone knows how love operates, why hasn't someone reduced it to a formula? Murky thinking, Toms, murky thinking is the answer, and an unwillingness to accept cold facts. If you cannot face them—"

"I can face anything," Toms said, "if I have to. Let's continue."

As the weeks passed, Toms learned the words which express the first quickening of interest, shade by

shade, until an attachment is formed. He learned what that attachment really is and the three words that express it. This brought him to the rhetoric of sensation, where the body becomes supreme.

Here the language was specific instead of allusive, and dealt with feelings produced by certain words, and above all, by certain physical actions.

A startling little black machine taught Toms the thirty-eight separate and distinct sensations which the touch of a hand can engender, and he learned how to locate that sensitive area, no larger than a dime, which exists just below the right shoulder blade.

He learned an entirely new system of caressing, which caused impulses to explode—and even implode—along the nerve paths and to shower colored sparks before the eyes.

He was also taught the social advantages of conspicuous desensitization.

He learned many things about physical love which he had dimly suspected, and still more things which *no one* had suspected.

It was intimidating knowledge. Toms had imagined himself to be at least an adequate lover. Now he found that he knew nothing, nothing at all, and that his best efforts had been comparable to the play of amorous hippopotami.

"But what else could you expect?" Varris asked. "Good love-making, Toms, calls for more study, more sheer intensive labor than any other acquired skill. Do you still wish to learn?"

"Definitely!" Toms said. "Why, when I'm an expert on love-making, I'll—I can—"

"That is no concern of mine," the old man stated. "Let's return to our lessons."

Next, Toms learned the Cycles of Love. Love, he discovered, is dynamic, constantly rising and falling, and doing so in definite patterns. There were fifty-two major patterns, three hundred and six minor patterns, four general exceptions, and nine specific exceptions.

Toms learned them better than his own name.

He acquired the uses of the Tertiary Touch. And he never forgot the day he was taught what a bosom *really* was like.

"But I can't say that!" Toms objected, appalled.

"It's true, isn't it?" Varris insisted.

"No! I mean—yes, I suppose it is. But it's unflattering."

"So it seems. But examine, Toms. Is it *actually* unflattering?"

Toms examined and found the compliment that lies beneath the insult, and so he learned another facet of the Language of Love.

Soon he was ready for the study of the Apparent Negations. He discovered that for every degree of love, there is a corresponding degree of hate, which is in itself a form of love. He came to understand how valuable hate is, how it gives substance and body to love, and how even indifference and loathing have their place in the nature of love.

Varris gave him a ten-hour written examination, which Toms passed with superlative marks. He was eager to finish, but Varris noticed that a slight tic had developed in his student's left eye and that his hands had a tendency to shake.

"You need a vacation," the old man informed him.

Toms had been thinking this himself. "You may be right," he said, with barely concealed eagerness. "Suppose I go to Cythera V for a few weeks."

Varris, who knew Cythera's reputation, smiled cynically. "Eager to try out your new knowledge?"

"Well, why not? Knowledge is to be used."

"Only after it's mastered."

"But I *have* mastered it! Couldn't we call this field work? A thesis, perhaps?"

"No thesis is necessary," Varris said.

"But damn it all," Toms exploded, "I should do a little experimentation! I should find out for myself how all this works. Especially Approach 33-CV. It sounds fine in theory, but I've been wondering how it works out in actual practice. There's nothing like direct experience, you know, to reinforce—"

"Did you journey all this way to become a super-seducer?" Varris asked, with evident disgust.

"Of course not," Toms said. "But a little experimentation wouldn't—"

"Your knowledge of the mechanics of sensation would be barren, unless you understand love, as well. You have progressed too far to be satisfied with mere thrills."

Toms, searching his heart, knew this to be true. But he set his jaw stubbornly. "I'd like to find out *that* for myself, too."

"You may go," Varris said, "but don't come back. No one will accuse me of loosing a callous scientific seducer upon the galaxy."

"Oh, all right. To hell with it. Let's get back to work."

"No. Look at yourself! A little more unrelieved studying, young man, and you will lose the capacity to make love. And wouldn't that be a sorry state of affairs?"

Toms agreed that it would certainly be.

"I know the perfect spot," Varris told him, "for relaxation from the study of love."

They entered the old man's spaceship and journeyed five days to a small unnamed planetoid. When they landed, the old man took Toms to the bank of a swift flowing river, where the water ran fiery red, with green diamonds of foam. The trees that grew on the banks of that river were stunted and strange, and colored vermilion. Even the grass was unlike grass, for it was orange and blue.

"How alien!" gasped Toms.

"It is the least human spot I've found in this humdrum corner of the galaxy," Varris explained. "And believe me, I've done some looking."

Toms stared at him, wondering if the old man was out of his mind. But soon he understood what Varris meant.

For months, he had been studying human reactions and human feelings, and surrounding it all was the now suffocating feeling of soft human flesh. He had immersed himself in humanity, studied it, bathed in it, eaten and drunk and dreamed it. It was a relief to be here, where the water ran red and the trees were stunted and strange and vermilion, and the grass was orange and blue, and there was no reminder of Earth.

Toms and Varris separated, for even each other's humanity was a nuisance. Toms spent his days wandering along the river edge, marveling at the flowers which moaned when he came near them. At night, three wrinkled moons played tag with each other, and the morning sun was different from the yellow sun of Earth.

At the end of a week, refreshed and renewed, Toms and Varris returned to G'cel, the Tyanian city dedicated to the study of love.

Toms was taught the five hundred and six shades of Love Proper, from the first faint possibility to the ultimate feeling, which is so powerful that only five men and one woman have experienced it, and the strongest of them survived less than an hour.

Under the tutelage of a bank of small, interrelated calculators, he studied the intensification of love.

He learned all of the thousand different sensations of which the human body is capable, and how to augment them, and how to intensify them until they become unbearable, and how to make the

unbearable bearable, and finally pleasurable, at which point the organism is not far from death.

After that, he was taught some things which have never been put into words and, with luck, never will.

"And that," Varris said one day, "is everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes, Toms. The heart has no secrets from you. Nor, for that matter, has the soul, or mind, or the viscera. You have mastered the Language of Love. Now return to your young lady."

"I will!" cried Toms. "At last she will know!"

"Drop me a postcard," Varris said. "Let me know how you're getting on."

"I'll do that," Toms promised. Fervently he shook his teacher's hand and departed for Earth.

At the end of the long trip, Jefferson Toms hurried to Doris's home. Perspiration beaded his forehead, and his hands were shaking. He was able to classify the feeling as Stage Two Anticipatory Tremors, with mild masochistic overtones. But that didn't help—this was his first field work, and he was nervous. Had he mastered *everything*?

He rang the bell.

She opened the door and Toms saw that she was more beautiful than he had remembered, her eyes smoky-gray and misted with tears, her hair the color of a rocket exhaust, her figure slight but sweetly curved. He felt again the lump in his throat and sudden memories of autumn, evening, rain, and candlelight.

"I'm back," he croaked.

"Oh, Jeff," she said, very softly. "Oh, Jeff."

Toms simply stared, unable to say a word.

"It's been so long, Jeff, and I kept wondering if it was all worth it. Now I know."

"You—know?"

"Yes, my darling! I waited for you! I'd wait a hundred years, or a thousand! I love you, Jeff!"

She was in his arms.

"Now tell me, Jeff," she said, "*Tell me!*"

And Toms looked at her, and felt, and sensed, searched his classifications, selected his modifiers, checked and double-checked. And after much searching, and careful selection, and absolute certainty, and allowing for his present state of mind, and not forgetting to take into account climatic conditions, phases of the Moon, wind speed and direction, Sun spots, and other phenomena which have their due effect upon love, he said:

"My dear, I am rather fond of you."

"Jeff! Surely you can say more than that! The Language of Love—"

"The Language is damnably precise," Toms said wretchedly. "I'm sorry, but the phrase 'I am rather fond of you' expresses precisely what I feel."

"Oh, Jeff!"

"Yes," he mumbled.

"Oh, damn you, Jeff!"

There was, of course, a painful scene and a very painful separation. Toms took to traveling.

He held jobs here and there, working as a riveter at Saturn-Lockheed, a wiper on the Helg-Vinosce Trader, a farmer for a while on a kibbutz on Israel IV. He bummed around the Inner Dalmian System for several years, living mostly on handouts. Then, at Novilocessile, he met a pleasant, brown-haired girl, courted her, and, in due course, married her and set up housekeeping.

Their friends say that the Tomses are tolerably happy, although their home makes most people uncomfortable. It is a pleasant enough place, but the rushing red river nearby makes people edgy. And who can get used to vermilion trees, and orange-and-blue grass, and moaning flowers, and three wrinkled moons playing tag in the alien sky?

Toms likes it, though, and Mrs. Toms is, if nothing else, a flexible young lady.

Toms wrote a letter to his philosophy professor on Earth, saying that he had solved the problem of the demise of the Tyanian race, at least to his own satisfaction. The trouble with scholarly research, he wrote, is the inhibiting effect it has upon action. The Tyanians, he was convinced, had been so preoccupied with the science of love, after a while they just didn't get around to making any.

And eventually he sent a short postcard to George Varris. He simply said that he was married, having succeeded in finding a girl for whom he felt "quite a substantial liking."

"Lucky devil," Varris growled, after reading the card. "'Vaguely enjoyable' was the best I could ever find."

MORNING AFTER

SLOWLY and unwillingly, Piersen recovered consciousness. He lay on his back, eyes tightly closed, trying to postpone the inevitable awakening. But consciousness returned and brought sensation with it. Needles of pain stabbed at his eyeballs, and the base of his skull began to pound like a giant heart. His joints seemed to be on fire, and his stomach was a deep well of nausea.

It was no relief for him to realize that he was suffering from the absolute king and emperor of all hangovers.

Piersen had considerable knowledge of hangovers. He had experienced most of them in his time—the alcohol jitters, the miniscarette depressions, the triple skliti nerve ache. But this hangover felt like a combination and intensification of them all, with heroin withdrawal symptoms thrown in for good measure.

What had he been drinking last night? And where? He tried to remember, but last night, like so many nights in his life, was a featureless blur. He would have to reconstruct it, as usual, piece by piece.

Well, he decided, it was time to do the manly thing. Time to open his eyes, get out of bed, and walk bravely to the medicine chest. A hypo of di-chloral right down the main line ought to bring him around.

Piersen opened his eyes and started to get out of bed. Then he realized that he wasn't in bed.

He was lying in tall grass, with a glaring white sky overhead and the odor of decaying vegetation in his nostrils.

He groaned and closed his eyes again. This was too much. He must have been *really* boiled last night, potted, fried, roasted, and done to a turn. Hadn't even made it home. Apparently he had passed out in Central Park. Now he'd have to hail a flit and hold himself together until he could reach his apartment.

With a mighty effort, he opened his eyes and stood up.

He was standing in tall grass. Surrounding him, as far as he could see, were giant orange-boled trees. The trees were interlaced with purple and green vines, some as thick as his body. Around the trees, impenetrably dense, was a riotous jungle of ferns, shrubs, evil yellow orchids, black creepers, and many unidentifiable plants of ominous shape and hue. Through this dense jungle, he could hear the chitter and squeak of small animals and a distant grating roar from some larger beast.

"This is not Central Park," Piersen informed himself.

He looked around, shielding his eyes from the glaring sunless sky.

"I don't even think it's Earth," he said.

He was astonished and delighted with his calmness. Gravely, he sat down in the tall grass and proceeded to review his situation.

His name was Walter Hill Piersen. He was thirty-two years old, a resident of New York City. He was a fully accredited voter, respectably unemployed, moderately well off. Last night, he had left his apartment at seven-fifteen, with the intention of partying. It must have been quite an evening.

Yes, quite an evening, Piersen told himself. At some time during it, he seemed to have blacked out. But instead of coming to in bed, or even in Central Park, he had awakened in a thick and smelly jungle. Furthermore, he felt certain that this jungle was not on Earth.

That summed it up rather well, Piersen told himself. He looked around at the vast orange trees, the

purple and green vines which interwove them, the harsh white sunlight streaming through. And, finally, the reality of it all filtered through his befogged mind.

He shrieked in terror, buried his head in his arms, and passed out.

The next time he recovered consciousness, most of his hangover had gone, leaving behind only a taste in his mouth and a general state of debility. Then and there, Piersen decided it was time he went on the wagon—past time, when he started having hallucinations about orange-colored trees and purple vines in an alien jungle.

Cold sober now, he opened his eyes and saw that he was in an alien jungle.

"All right!" he shouted. "What's this all about?"

There was no immediate answer. Then, from the surrounding trees, a vast chattering of unseen animal life began, and slowly subsided.

Shakily, Piersen stood up and leaned against a tree. He had reacted all he could to the situation; there was no more astonishment left in him. So he was in a jungle. All right—then what was he doing there?

No answer sprang to mind. Obviously, he told himself, something unusual must have happened last night. But what? Painfully, he tried to reconstruct the events of the evening.

He had left his apartment at seven-fifteen and gone to ...

He whirled. Something was coming toward him, moving softly through the underbrush. Piersen waited, his heart hammering. It came nearer, moving cautiously, sniffing and moaning faintly. Then the underbrush parted and the creature came out into the open.

It was about ten feet long, a streamlined blue-black animal shaped like a torpedo or a shark, moving toward him on four sets of thick, stubby legs. It seemed to have no external eyes or ears, but long antennae vibrated from its sloping forehead. When it opened its long, undershot jaw, Piersen saw rows of yellow teeth.

Moaning softly to itself, the creature advanced upon him.

Although he had never seen nor dreamed of a beast like this, Piersen didn't pause to question its validity. He turned and sprinted into the jungle. For fifteen minutes, he raced through the underbrush. Then, completely winded, he was forced to stop.

Far behind him, he could hear the blue-black creature moaning as it followed.

Piersen started again, walking now. Judging by the creature's moans, it couldn't move very rapidly. He was able to maintain his distance at a walk. But what would happen when he stopped? What were its intentions toward him? And could it climb trees?

He decided not to think about it at present.

The first question, the key to all other questions, was: *What was he doing here? What happened to him last night?*

He concentrated.

He had left his apartment at seven-fifteen and gone for a walk. The New York climatologist had, by popular demand, produced a pleasant misty evening with a fertile hint of rain, which, of course, would never fall on the city proper. It made for pleasant walking.

He strolled down Fifth Avenue, window-shopping, and making note of the Free Days offered by the stores. Baimler's Department Store, he noticed, was having a Free Day next Wednesday, from six to nine A.M. He really should get a special pass from his alderman. Even with it, he would have to wake up early and stand in the preferential line. But it was better than paying.

In half an hour, he was comfortably hungry. There were several good commercial restaurants

nearby, but he seemed to be without funds. So he turned down 54th Street, to the Coutray Free Restaurant.

At the door, he showed his voting card and his special pass, signed by Coutray's third assistant secretary, and was allowed in. He ordered a plain filet mignon dinner and drank a mild red wine with it, since no stronger beverages were served there. His waiter brought him the evening newspaper. Piersen scanned the listings for free entertainment, but found nothing to his liking.

As he was leaving, the manager of the restaurant hurried up to him.

"Beg your pardon, sir," the manager said. "Was everything satisfactory, sir?"

"The service was slow," said Piersen. "The filet, although edible, was not of truly prime quality. The wine was passable."

"Yes, sir—thank you, sir—our apologies, sir," the manager said, jotting down Piersen's comments in a little notebook. "We'll try to improve, sir. Your dinner came to you courtesy of the Honorable Blake Coutray, Water Commissioner for New York. Mr. Coutray is standing for re-election on November 22. Row J-3 in your voting booth. We humbly solicit your vote, sir."

"We'll see," said Piersen, and left the restaurant.

In the street, he helped himself to a souvenir pack of cigarettes which a record-playing dispensing machine was distributing for Elmer Baine, a minor Brooklyn politician. He strolled again along Fifth Avenue, thinking about Blake Coutray.

Like any accredited citizen, Piersen valued his vote highly and bestowed it only after mature consideration. He, like all voters, considered a candidate's qualifications carefully before voting for or against him.

In Coutray's favor was the fact that he had maintained a good restaurant for nearly a year. But what *else* had he done? Where was that free amusement center he had promised, and the jazz concerts?

Shortage of public funds was not a valid excuse.

Would a new man do more? Or should Coutray be given another term? These were not questions to be decided out of hand, Piersen thought. And now was not the time for serious thinking. Nights were made for pleasure, intoxication, laughter.

What should he do this evening? He had seen most of the free shows. Sporting events didn't interest him particularly. There were several parties going, but they didn't sound very amusing. He could find available girls at the Mayor's Open House, but Piersen's appetites had been waning of late.

So he could get drunk, which was the surest escape from an evening's boredom. What would it be? Miniscarette? A contact intoxicant? Skliti?

"Hey, Walt!"

He turned. Billie Benz was walking toward him, grinning broadly, half roasted already.

"Hey, there, Walt boy!" Benz said. "You got anything on tonight?"

"Nothing much," Piersen asked. "Why?"

"A new kick's opening. Fine, brilliant, lively new kick. Care to try?"

Piersen frowned. He didn't like Benz. The big, loud, red-faced man was a thoroughgoing shirker, a completely worthless human. The fact that he held no job didn't bother Piersen. Hardly anyone worked anymore. Why work if you can vote? But Benz was too lazy even to vote. And that, Piersen felt, was too much. Voting was the obligation and livelihood of every citizen.

Still, Benz had an uncanny knack for finding new kicks before anyone else.

Piersen hesitated, then asked, "Is it free?"

"Freer than soup," Benz said, unoriginal as always.

"What's it all about?"

"Well, friend, come along and let me tell you ..."

Piersen mopped perspiration from his face. The jungle had become deathly still. He could no longer hear the blue-black animal moaning in the underbrush behind him. Perhaps it had given up the chase.

His evening clothes were ripped to shreds. Piersen stripped off the jacket and unbuttoned his shirt to the waist. The sun, hidden somewhere behind the dead-white sky, glared down. He was drenched in perspiration and his throat was parched. He would have to have water soon.

His situation was becoming perilous. But Piersen refused to think about it now. He had to know why he was here before he could plan a way out.

What fine, brilliant new kick had he gone to with Billie Benz?

He leaned against a tree and shut his eyes. Slowly the memory began to form in his mind. They had walked east on 62nd Street and then—

He heard the underbrush tremble and looked up quickly. The blue-black creature crept silently out. Its long antennae quivered, then homed on him. Instantly the creature gathered itself and sprang.

Reacting instinctively, Piersen jumped out of the way. The creature, claws extended, missed him, whirled, and leaped again. Off balance, Piersen couldn't dodge in time. He threw out both arms, and the shark-shaped animal crashed into him.

The impact slammed Piersen against a tree. Desperately, he clung to the beast's broad throat, straining to keep the snapping jaws from his face. He tightened his grip, trying to choke it, but there wasn't enough strength in his fingers.

The creature twisted and writhed, its paws clawing up the ground. Piersen's arms began to bend under the strain. The snapping jaws came within an inch of his face. A long black-specked tongue licked out—

In sheer revulsion, Piersen hurled the moaning creature from him. Before it could recover, he seized two vines and pulled himself into a tree. Driven by sheer panic, he scrambled up the slippery trunk from branch to branch. Thirty feet above the ground, he looked down.

The blue-black thing was coming up after him, climbing as though trees were its natural habitat.

Piersen went on, his whole body beginning to shake from the strain. The trunk was thinning out now, and there were only a few branches left to which he could cling. As he approached the top, fifty feet above the ground, the whole tree began to sway beneath his weight.

He looked down and saw the creature ten feet below him and still coming. Piersen groaned, afraid he could climb no further. But fright put strength into his body. He scrambled to the last large branch, took a firm grip, and drew back both legs. As the beast approached, he lashed out with both feet.

He caught it full in the body. Its claw tore out of the bark with a loud rasping sound. The creature fell, screaming, crashing through the overhanging branches, and finally hitting the ground with a squashy thud.

Then there was silence.

The creature was probably dead, Piersen thought. But he was not going down to investigate. No power on Earth—or any other planet in the Galaxy—would induce him to descend willingly from his tree. He was going to stay right where he was until he was damned good and ready to come down.

He slid down a few feet until he came to a large forked branch. Here he was able to make a secure perch for himself. When he was settled, he realized how close to collapse he was. Last night's

binge had drained him; today's exertions had squeezed him dry.

If anything larger than a squirrel attacked him now, he was finished.

He settled his leaden limbs against the tree, closed his eyes, and went on with his reconstruction of last night's events.

"Well, friend," Billie Benz had said, "come along and let me tell you. Better still, let me show you."

They walked east on 62nd Street, while the deep blue twilight darkened into night. Manhattan's lights came on, stars appeared on the horizon, and a crescent moon glowed through thin haze.

"Where are we going?" Piersen asked.

"Right hyar, podner," Benz said.

They were in front of a small brownstone building. A discreet brass sign on the door read NARCOLICS.

"New free drug parlor," said Benz. "It was opened just this evening by Thomas Moriarty, the Reform Candidate for Mayor. No one's heard about it yet."

"Fine!" Piersen said.

There were plenty of free activities in the city. The only problem was getting to them before the crowds collected, because almost everyone was in search of pleasure and change.

Many years back, the Central Eugenics Committee of the United World Government had stabilized the world population at a sensible figure. Not in a thousand years had there been so few people on Earth, and never had they been so well cared for. Undersea ecology, hydroponics, and full utilization of the surface lands made food and clothing abundantly available—overavailable, in fact. Lodgings for a small, stable population was no problem, with automatic building methods and a surplus of materials. Even luxury goods were no luxury.

It was a safe, stable, static culture. Those few who researched, produced, and kept the machines running received generous compensation. But most people just didn't bother working. There was no need and no incentive.

There were some ambitious men, of course, driven to acquire wealth, position, power. They went into politics. They solicited votes by feeding, clothing, and entertaining the populace of their districts, out of abundant public funds. And they cursed the fickle voters for switching to more impressive promise-makers.

It was a utopia of sorts. Poverty was forgotten, wars were long gone, and everyone had the guarantee of a long, easy life.

It must have been sheer human ingratitude that made the suicide rate so shockingly high.

Benz showed his passes to the door, which opened at once. They walked down a corridor to a large, comfortably furnished living room. Three men and one woman, early birds who had heard of the new opening, were slumped comfortably on couches, smoking pale green cigarettes. There was a pleasantly unpleasant pungent odor in the air.

An attendant came forward and led them to a vacant divan. "Make yourselves right at home, gentlemen," he said. "Light up a narcolic and let your troubles drift away."

He handed them each a pack of pale green cigarettes.

"What's in this stuff?" Piersen asked.

"Narcolic cigarettes," the attendant told them, "are a choice mixture of Turkish and Virginian tobaccos, with a carefully measured amount of narcola, an intoxicant plant which grows in Venus's

equatorial belt."

"Venus?" Benz asked. "I didn't know we'd reached Venus."

"Four years ago, sir," the attendant said. "The Yale Expedition made the first landing and set up a base."

"I think I read something about that," said Piersen. "Or saw it in a newsreel. Venus. Crude, jungly sort of place, isn't it?"

"Quite crude," the attendant said.

"I thought so," said Piersen. "Hard to keep up with everything. Is this narcola habit-forming?"

"Not at all, sir," the attendant reassured him. "Narcola has the effect alcohol should have, but rarely does—great lift, sensations of well-being, slow taper, no hangover. It comes to you courtesy of Thomas Moriarty, the Reform Candidate for Mayor. Row A-2 in your voting booths, gentlemen. We humbly solicit your votes."

Both men nodded and lighted up.

Piersen began to feel the effects almost at once. His first cigarette left him relaxed, disembodied, with a strong premonition of pleasure to come. His second enhanced these effects and produced others. His senses were marvelously sharpened. The world seemed a delightful place, a place of hope and wonder. And he himself became a vital and necessary part of it.

Benz nudged him in the ribs. "Pretty good, huh?"

"Damned fine," said Piersen. "This Moriarty must be a good man. World needs good men."

"Right," agreed Benz. "Needs smart men."

"Courageous, bold, farsighted men," Piersen went on emphatically. "Men like *us*, buddy, to mold the future and—" He stopped abruptly.

"Whatsa matter?" Benz asked.

Piersen didn't answer. By a fluke known to all drunkards, the narcotic had suddenly reversed its effect. He had been feeling godlike. Now, with an inebriate's clarity, he saw himself as he was.

He was Walter Hill Piersen, thirty-two, unmarried, unemployed, unwanted. He had taken a job when he was eighteen, to please his parents. But he had given it up after a week, because it bored him and interfered with his sleep. He had considered marriage once, but the responsibilities of a wife and family appalled him. He was almost thirty-three, thin, flabby-muscled, and pallid. He had never done anything of the slightest importance to himself or to anyone else, and he never would.

"Tell your buddy all about it, buddy," Benz said.

"Wanna do great things," Piersen mumbled, dragging on the cigarette.

"You do, pal?"

"Damn right! Wanna be adventurer!"

"Why didn't you say so? I'll fix it up for you!" Benz jumped up and tugged at Piersen's arm. "Come on!"

"You'll what?" Piersen tried to push Benz away. He just wanted to sit and feel terrible. But Benz yanked him to his feet.

"I know what you need, pal," Benz said. "Adventure, excitement! Well, I know the place for it!"

Piersen frowned thoughtfully, swaying on his feet. "Lean close," he said to Benz. "Gotta whisper."

Benz leaned over. Piersen whispered, "Want adventure—but *don't wanna get hurt*. Get it?"

"Got it," Benz assured him. "Know just what you want. Let's go! Adventure lies ahead! Safe adventure!"

Arm in arm, clutching their packs of narcolics, they staggered out of the Reform Candidate's drug

parlor.

A breeze had come up, swaying the tree in which Piersen clung. It blew across his hot, damp body, suddenly chilling him. His teeth began to chatter and his arms ached from gripping the smooth branch. His parched throat felt as though it were clogged with fine, hot sand.

The thirst was more than he could stand. If necessary, he'd face a dozen blue-black creatures now for a drink of water.

Slowly he started down the tree, shelving his dim memories of last night. He had to know what happened, but first he needed water.

At the base of the tree, he saw the blue-black creature, its back broken, sprawled motionless upon the ground. He passed it and pushed into the jungle.

He trudged forward, for hours or days, losing all track of time under the glaring, unchanging white sky. The brush tore at his clothing and birds screamed warning signals as he plunged on. He ignored everything, glassy-eyed and rubber-legged. He fell, picked himself up, and went on, fell again, and again. Like a robot, he continued until he stumbled upon a thin, muddy brown stream.

With no thought to the dangerous bacteria it might contain, Piersen sprawled on his face and drank.

After a while, he rested and surveyed his surroundings. Close around him were the walls of the jungle—bright, dense, alien. The sky above was glaring white, no lighter or darker than before. And small, unseen life chirped and squeaked in the underbrush.

This was a very lonely place, Piersen decided, and a very dangerous one. He wanted out.

But which way was out? Were there any cities here, any people? And if so, how would he ever find them in this directionless wasteland?

And what was he doing here?

He rubbed his unshaven jaw and tried to remember. Last night seemed a million years ago and a totally different life. New York was like a city in a dream. For him, the only truth was this jungle, and the hunger gnawing at his belly and the strange humming that had just begun.

He looked around, trying to locate the source of the sound. It seemed to come from all sides, from nowhere and everywhere. Piersen doubled his fists and stared until his eyes hurt, trying to catch sight of the new menace.

Then, close to him, a brilliant green shrub moved. Piersen leaped away from it, trembling violently. The shrub shook all over and its thin hooked leaves produced a humming sound.

Then—

The shrub looked at him.

It had no eyes. But Piersen could feel the shrub become *aware* of him, focus on him, come to a decision about him. The shrub hummed louder. Its branches stretched toward him, touched the ground, rooted, sent out searching tendrils which grew, rooted, and sent out new tendrils.

The plant was *growing* toward him, moving at the speed of a man walking slowly.

Piersen stared at the sharp, glittering hooked leaves reaching toward him. He couldn't believe it, yet he had to believe it.

And then he remembered the rest of what had happened last night.

"Hyar we be, podner," Benz said, turning into a brightly lighted building on Madison Avenue. He ushered Piersen into the elevator. They rode to the twenty-third floor and stepped into a large, bright

reception room.

A discreet sign on one wall read ADVENTURES UNLIMITED.

"I've heard about this place," Piersen said, dragging deeply on a narcolic cigarette. "It's supposed to be expensive."

"Don't worry about that," Benz told him.

A blonde receptionist took their names and led them to the private office of Dr. Srinagar Jones, Action Consultant.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Jones.

He was slight, thin, and wore heavy glasses. Piersen found it hard to restrain a giggle. *This* was an Action Consultant?

"So you gentlemen desire adventure?" Jones inquired pleasantly.

"*He* wants adventure," said Benz. "I'm just a friend of his."

"Of course. Now, then, sir," Jones said, turning to Piersen, "what kind of adventure did you have in mind?"

"*Outdoor* adventure," Piersen replied, a trifle thickly, but with absolute confidence.

"We have just the thing," Jones said. "Usually there is a fee. But tonight all adventures are free, courtesy of President Main. Row C-1 in your voting booth. Come this way, sir."

"Hold on. I don't want to get killed, you know. Is this adventure safe?"

"Perfectly safe. No other kind of adventure would be tolerated in this day and age. Here's how it works. You relax comfortably on a bed in our Explorer's Room and receive a painless injection. This causes immediate loss of consciousness. Then, through a judicious application of auditory, tactile, and other stimuli, we produce an adventure in your mind."

"Like a dream?" Piersen asked.

"That would be the best analogy. This dream adventure is absolutely realistic in content. You experience actual pain, actual emotions. There's no way you can tell it from the real thing. Except, of course, that it *is* a dream and therefore perfectly safe."

"What happens if I'm killed in the adventure?"

"It's the same as dreaming that you're killed. You wake up, that's all. But while you're in this ultrarealistic, vividly colored dream, you have free will and conscious power over your dream movements."

"Do I know all this while I'm having the adventure?"

"Absolutely. While in the dream, you have full knowledge of its dream status."

"Then lead on!" Piersen shouted. "On with the dream!"

The bright green shrub grew slowly toward him. Piersen burst into laughter. A dream! Of course, it was all a dream! Nothing could harm him. The menacing shrub was a figment of his imagination, like the blue-black animal. Even if the beast's jaws had closed on his throat, he would not have been killed.

He would simply have awakened in the Explorer's Room of Adventures Unlimited.

It all seemed ridiculous now. Why hadn't he realized all this earlier? That blue-black thing was obviously a dream creation. And the bright green shrub was preposterous. It was all rather silly and unbelievable, once you really thought about it.

In a loud voice, Piersen said, "All right. You can wake me up now."

Nothing happened. Then he remembered that you couldn't awaken simply by requesting it. That would invalidate the sense of adventure and destroy the therapeutic effects of excitement and fear

upon a jaded nervous system.

He remembered now. The only way you could leave an adventure was by winning through all obstacles. Or by being killed.

The shrub had almost reached his feet. Piersen watched it, marveling at its realistic appearance.

It fastened one of its hooked leaves into the leather of his shoe. Piersen grinned, proud of the way he was mastering his fear and revulsion. He merely had to remember that the thing couldn't hurt him.

But how, he asked himself, could a person have a realistic adventure if he knew all the time that it wasn't real? Surely Adventures Unlimited must have considered that.

Then he remembered the last thing Jones told him.

He had been lying on the white cot and Jones was bending over him, hypodermic needle ready. Piersen had asked, "Look, pal, how can I have an adventure if I *know* it's not real?"

"That has been taken care of," Jones had said. "You see, sir, some of our clients undergo *real* adventures."

"Huh?"

"Real, actual, physical adventures. One client out of many receives the knockout injection, but no further stimulus. He is placed aboard a spaceship and taken to Venus. There he revives and experiences in fact what the others undergo in fantasy. If he wins through, he lives."

"And if not?"

Jones had shrugged his shoulders, waiting patiently, the hypodermic poised.

"That's inhuman!" Piersen had cried.

"We disagree. Consider, Mr. Piersen, the need for adventure in the world today. Danger is necessary, to offset a certain weakening of human fiber which easy times has brought to the race. These fantasy adventures present danger in its safest and most palatable form. But they would lose all value if the person undergoing them did not take them seriously. The adventurer must have the possibility, no matter how remote, that he is truly engaging in a life-and-death struggle."

"But the ones who really go to Venus—"

"An insignificant percentage," Jones reassured him. "Less than one in ten thousand. Simply to enhance the possibility of danger for the others."

"But is it legal?" Piersen had persisted.

"Quite legal. On a total percentage basis, you run a greater risk drinking miniscarette or smoking narcolics."

"Well," said Piersen, "I'm not sure I want—"

The hypodermic bit suddenly into his arm.

"Everything will be all right," Jones said soothingly. "Just relax, Mr. Piersen ..."

That was his last memory before awakening in the jungle.

By now, the green shrub had reached Piersen's ankle, A slender hooked leaf slid, very slowly, very gently, into his flesh. All he felt was the faintest tickling sensation. After a moment, the leaf turned a dull red.

A blood-sucking plant, Piersen thought with some amusement.

The whole adventure suddenly palled on him. It had been a silly drunken idea in the first place. Enough was enough. He wanted out of this, and immediately.

The shrub edged closer and slid two more hooked leaves into Piersen's leg. The entire plant was beginning to turn a muddy red-brown.

Piersen wanted to go back to New York, to parties, free food, free entertainment, and a lot of

sleep. If he destroyed this menace, another would spring up. This might go on for days or weeks.

The quickest way home was to let the shrub kill him. Then he could simply wake up.

His strength was beginning to ebb. He sat down, noticing that several more shrubs were growing toward him, attracted by the scent of blood.

"It can't be real," he said out loud. "Who ever heard of a bloodsucking plant, even on Venus?"

High above him were great, black-winged birds, soaring patiently, waiting for their chance at the corpse.

Could this be real?

The odds, he reminded himself, were ten thousand to one that it was a dream. *Only* a dream. A vivid, realistic dream. But a dream, nevertheless.

Still, suppose it was real?

He was growing dizzy and weak from loss of blood. He thought, *I want to go home. The way home is to die. The chance of actual death is so small, so infinitesimal...*

The truth burst upon him. In this age, no one would dare risk the life of a voter. Adventures Unlimited couldn't really put a man in jeopardy!

Jones had told him about that one in ten thousand merely to add a sense of reality to the fantasy adventure!

That had to be the truth. He lay back, closed his eyes, and prepared to die.

While he was dying, thoughts stirred in his mind, old dreams and fears and hopes. He remembered the one job he had held and his mingled pleasure and regret at leaving it. He thought of his obtuse, hard-working parents, unwilling to accept the rewards of civilization without, as they put it, earning them. He thought, harder than ever before in his life, and he came into contact with a Piersen whose existence he had never suspected.

The other Piersen was a very uncomplicated creature. He simply wanted to live. He was determined to live. This Piersen refused to die under any circumstances—even imaginary.

The two Piersens, one motivated by pride, the other by desire for survival, struggled briefly, while strength ebbed out of their body. Then they resolved the conflict upon mutually satisfactory terms.

"That damned Jones thinks I'll die," Piersen said. "Die in order to wake up. Well, I'll be damned if I'll give him the satisfaction!"

It was the only way he could accept his own desire to live.

Frighteningly weak, he struggled to his feet and tried to pull the bloodsucking plant loose. It wouldn't release its grip. With a shout of rage, Piersen reached down and wrenched with all his strength. The hooks slashed his legs as they pulled free, and other hooks slid into his right arm.

But his legs were free now. He kicked aside two more plants and lurched into the jungle, with the green shrub growing up his arm.

Piersen stumbled along until he was far from the other plants. Then he tried to yank the last shrub from his arm.

The shrub caught both his arms, imprisoning them. Sobbing with anger and pain, Piersen swung his arms high and slammed them against the trunk of a tree.

The hooks loosened. Again he slammed his arms against the tree, shutting his eyes to the pain. Again and again, until the shrub released.

Instantly, Piersen began staggering on again.

But he had delayed his life struggle too long. He was streaming blood from a hundred slashes, and the scent was like an alarm bell through the jungle. Overhead, something swift and black descended.

Piersen threw himself down, and the shape passed over him with a flurry of beating wings, shrilling angrily.

He rolled to his feet and tried to find protection in a thorny bush. A great, black-winged bird with a crimson breast dived again.

This time, sharp claws caught him in the shoulder and flung him down. The bird landed on his chest with a wild beating of wings. It pecked at his eyes, missed, pecked again.

Piersen lashed out. His fist caught the bird full in the throat, knocking it over.

He scrambled into the thorn bush on all fours. The bird circled, shrilling, trying to find a way in. Piersen moved deeper into the thicket toward safety.

Then he heard a low moan beside him.

He had waited too long. The jungle had marked him for death and would never let him go. Beside him was a long, blue-black, shark-shaped creature, slightly smaller than the first he had encountered, creeping quickly and easily toward him through the thorn thicket.

Caught between a shrieking death in the air and a moaning death on the ground, Piersen came to his feet. He shouted his fear, anger, and defiance. And without hesitation, he flung himself at the blue-black beast.

The great jaws slashed. Piersen lay motionless. With his last vestige of consciousness, he saw the jaw widen for the death stroke.

Can it be real, Piersen wondered, in sudden fear, just before he blanked out.

When he recovered consciousness, he was lying on a white cot, in a white, softly lighted room. Slowly his head cleared and he remembered—his death.

Quite an adventure, he thought. Must tell the boys. But first a drink. Maybe ten drinks and a little entertainment.

He turned his head. A girl in white, who had been sitting in a chair beside his bed, rose and bent over him.

"How do you feel, Mr. Piersen?" she asked.

"Fair," Piersen said. "Where's Jones?"

"Jones?"

"Srinagar Jones. He runs this place."

"You must be mistaken, sir," the girl told him. "Dr. Baintree runs our colony."

"Your *what?*" Piersen shouted.

A man came into the room. "That will be all, Nurse," he said. He turned to Piersen. "Welcome to Venus, Mr. Piersen. I'm Dr. Baintree, Director of Camp Five."

Piersen stared unbelievingly at the tall, bearded man. He struggled out of bed and would have fallen if Baintree hadn't steadied him.

He was amazed to find most of his body wrapped in bandages.

"It was real?" he asked.

Baintree helped him to the window. Piersen looked out on cleared land, fences, and the distant green edge of the jungle.

"One out of ten thousand!" Piersen said bitterly. "Of all the damned luck! I could have been killed!"

"You nearly were," said Baintree. "But your coming here wasn't a matter of luck or statistics."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Piersen, let me put it this way. Life is easy on Earth. The problems of human existence have

been solved—but solved, I fear, to the detriment of the race. Earth stagnates. The birth rate continues to fall, the suicide rate goes up. New frontiers are opening in space, but hardly anyone is interested in going to them. Still, the frontiers *must* be manned, if the race is to survive."

"I have heard that exact speech," Piersen said, "in the newsreels, on the solido, in the papers—"

"It didn't seem to impress you."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true," Baintree assured him, "whether you believe it or not."

"You're a fanatic," Piersen said. "I'm not going to argue with you. Suppose it is true—where do I fit in?"

"We are desperately undermanned," said Baintree. "We've offered every inducement, tried every possible method of recruitment. But no one wants to leave Earth."

"Naturally. So?"

"This is the only method that works. Adventures Unlimited is run by us. Likely candidates are transported here and left in the jungle. We watch to see how they make out. It provides an excellent testing ground—for the individual as well as for us."

"What would have happened," Piersen asked, "if I hadn't fought back against the shrubs?"

Baintree shrugged his shoulders.

"And so you recruited me," Piersen said. "You ran me through your obstacle course, and I fought like a good little man, and you saved me just in the nick of time. Now I'm supposed to be flattered that you picked me, huh? Now I'm supposed to suddenly realize I'm a rough, tough outdoor man? Now I'm supposed to be filled with a courageous, farsighted pioneering spirit?"

Baintree watched him steadily.

"And now I'm supposed to sign up as a pioneer? Baintree, you must think I'm nuts or something. Do you honestly think I'm going to give up a very pleasant existence on Earth so I can grub around on a farm or hack through a jungle on Venus? To hell with you, Baintree, and to hell with your whole salvation program."

"I quite understand how you feel," Baintree answered. "Our methods are somewhat arbitrary, but the situation requires it. When you've calmed down—"

"I'm perfectly calm now!" Piersen screamed. "Don't give me any more sermons about saving the world! I want to go home to a nice comfortable pleasure palace."

"You can leave on this evening's flight," Baintree said.

"What? Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"I don't get it," said Piersen. "Are you trying psychology on me? It won't work—I'm going home. I don't see why any of your kidnap victims stay here."

"They don't," Baintree said.

"*What?*"

"Occasionally, one decides to stay. But for the most part, they react like you. They do *not* discover a sudden deep love for the soil, an overwhelming urge to conquer a new planet. That's storybook stuff. They want to go home. But they often agree to help us on Earth."

"How?"

"By becoming recruiters," Baintree said. "It's fun, really. You eat and drink and enjoy yourself, the same as ever. And when you find a likely looking candidate, you talk him into taking a dream adventure with Adventures Unlimited—exactly as Benz did with you."

Piersen looked startled. "Benz? That worthless bum is a recruiter?"

"Certainly. Did you think recruiters were starry-eyed idealists? They're people like you, Piersen, who enjoy having a good time, enjoy being on the inside of things, and perhaps even enjoy doing some good for the human race, as long as it's no trouble to them. I think you'd like the work."

"I might try it for a while," Piersen said. "For a kick."

"That's all we ask," said Baintree.

"But how do you get new colonists?"

"Well, that's a funny thing. After a few years, many of our recruiters get curious about what's happening here. And they return."

"Well," Piersen said, "I'll try this recruiting kick for a while. But only for a while, as long as I feel like it."

"Of course," said Baintree. "Come, you'd better get packed."

"And don't count on me coming back. I'm a city boy. I like my comfort. The salvation racket is strictly for the eager types."

"Of course. By the way, you did very well in the jungle."

"I did?"

Baintree nodded gravely.

Piersen stayed at the window, staring at the fields, the buildings, the fences, and the distant edge of the jungle which he had fought and nearly overcome.

"We'd better leave," said Baintree.

"Eh? All right, I'm coming," Piersen said.

He turned slowly from the window with a faint trace of irritation that he tried to and couldn't identify.

IF THE RED SLAYER

I WON'T even try to describe the pain. I'll just say that it was unbearable even with anesthetics, and that I bore it because I didn't have any choice. Then it faded away and I opened my eyes and looked into the faces of the brahmins standing over me. There were three of them, dressed in the usual white operating gowns and white gauze masks. They say they wear those masks to keep germs out of us. But every soldier knows they wear them so we can't recognize them.

I was still doped up to the ears on anesthetics, and only chunks and bits of my memory were functioning. I asked, "How long was I dead?"

"About ten hours," one of the brahmins told me.

"How did I die?"

"Don't you remember?" the tallest brahmin asked.

"Not yet."

"Well," the tallest brahmin said, "you were with your platoon in Trench 2645B-4. At dawn your entire company made a frontal attack, trying to capture the next trench. Number 2645B-5."

"And what happened?" I asked.

"You stopped a couple of machine gun bullets. The new kind with the shock heads. Remember now? You took one in the chest and three more in the legs. When the medics found you, you were dead."

"Did we capture the trench?" I asked.

"No. Not this time."

"I see." My memory was returning rapidly as the anesthetic wore off. I remembered the boys in my platoon. I remembered our trench. Old 2645B-4 had been my home for over a year, and it was pretty nice as trenches go. The enemy had been trying to capture it, and our dawn assault had been a counterattack, really. I remembered the machine gun bullets tearing me into shreds, and the wonderful relief I had felt when they did. And I remembered something else, too ...

I sat upright. "Hey, just a minute!" I said.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought eight hours was the upper limit for bringing a man back to life."

"We've improved our techniques since then," one of the brahmins told me. "We're improving them all the time. Twelve hours is the upper limit now, just as long as there isn't serious brain damage."

"Good for you," I said. Now my memory had returned completely, and I realized what had happened. "However, you made a serious mistake in bringing *me* back."

"What's the beef, soldier?" one of them asked in that voice only officers get.

"Read my dogtags," I said.

He read them. His forehead, which was all I could see of his face, became wrinkled. He said, "This *is* unusual!"

"Unusual!" I said.

"You see," he told me, "you were in a whole trench full of dead men. We were told they were all first-timers. Our orders were to bring the whole batch back to life."

"And you didn't read any dogtags first?"

"We were overworked. There wasn't time. I really am sorry, Private. If I'd known—"

"To hell with that," I said. "I want to see the Inspector General."

"Do you really think—"

"Yes, I do," I said. "I'm no trench lawyer, but I've got a real beef. It's my right to see the I.G."

They went into a whispered conference, and I looked myself over. The brahmins had done a pretty good job on me. Not as good as they did in the first years of the war, of course. The skin grafts were sloppier now, and I felt a little scrambled inside. Also my right arm was about two inches longer than the left; bad joiner-work. Still, it was a pretty good job.

The brahmins came out of their conference and gave me my clothes. I dressed. "Now, about the Inspector General," one of them said. "That's a little difficult right now. You see—"

Needless to say, I didn't see the I.G. They took me to see a big, beefy, kindly old Master Sergeant. One of those understanding types who talks to you and makes everything all right. Except that I wasn't having any.

"Now, now, Private," the kindly old sarge said. "What's this I hear about you kicking up a fuss about being brought back to life?"

"You heard correct," I said. "Even a private soldier has his rights under the Articles of War. Or so I've been told."

"He certainly does," said the kindly old sarge.

"I've done my duty," I said. "Seventeen years in the army, eight years in combat. Three times killed, three times brought back. The orders read that you can requisition death after the third time. That's what I did, and it's stamped on my dogtags. But I wasn't *left* dead. Those damned medics brought me back to life again, and it isn't fair. I want to stay dead."

"It's much better staying alive," the sarge said. "Alive, you always have a chance of being rotated back to noncombat duties. Rotation isn't working very fast on account of the man-power shortage. But there's still a chance."

"I know," I said. "But I think I'd just as soon stay dead."

"I think I could promise you that in six months or so—"

"I want to stay dead," I said firmly. "After the third time, it's my privilege under the Articles of War."

"Of course it is," the kindly old sarge said, smiling at me, one soldier to another. "But mistakes happen in wartime. Especially in a war like this." He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. "I remember when the thing started. It sure looked like a push-button affair when it started. But both us and the Reds had a full arsenal of anti-missile-missiles, and that pretty well deadlocked the atomic stuff. The invention of the atomic damper clinched it. That made it a real infantry affair."

"I know, I know."

"But our enemies outnumbered us," the kindly old sarge said.

"They still do. All those millions and millions of Russians and Chinese! We had to have more fighting men. We had to at least hold our own. That's why the medics started reviving the dead."

"I know all this. Look, Sarge, I want us to win. I want it bad. I've been a good soldier. But I've been killed three times, and—"

"The trouble is," the sarge said, "the Reds are reviving their dead, too. The struggle for manpower in the front lines is crucial *right now*. The next few months will tell the tale, one way or the other. So why not forget about all this? The next time you're killed, I can promise you'll be left alone. So let's overlook it this time."

"I want to see the Inspector General," I said.

"All right, Private," the kindly old sarge said, in a not very friendly tone. "Go to Room 303."

I went to 303, which was an outer office, and I waited. I was feeling sort of guilty about all the fuss I was kicking up. After all, there was a war on. But I was angry, too. A soldier has his rights, even in a war. Those damned brahmins ...

It's funny how they got that name. They're just medics, not Hindus or Brahmins or anything like that. They got the name because of a newspaper article a couple years ago, when all this was new. The guy who wrote the article told about how the medics could revive dead men now, and make them combat-worthy. It was pretty hot stuff then. The writer quoted a poem by Emerson. The poem starts out—

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain thinks he is
slain,
They know not well the subtle
ways.
I keep, and pass, and turn
again.

That's how things were. You could never know, when you killed a man, whether he'd stay dead, or be back in the trenches shooting at you the next day. And you didn't know whether you'd stay dead or not if you got killed. Emerson's poem was called "Brahma," so our medics got to be called brahmins.

Being brought back to life wasn't bad at first. Even with the pain, it was good to be alive. But you finally reach a time when you get tired of being killed and brought back and killed and brought back. You start wondering how many deaths you owe your country, and if it might not be nice and restful staying dead a while. You look forward to the long sleep.

The authorities understood this. Being brought back too often was bad for morale. So they set three revivals as the limit. After the third time you could choose rotation or permanent death. The authorities preferred you to choose death; a man who's been dead three times has a very bad effect on the morale of civilians. And most combat soldiers preferred to stay dead after the third time.

But I'd been cheated. I had been brought back to life for the fourth time. I'm as patriotic as the next man, but this I wasn't going to stand for.

At last I was allowed to see the Inspector General's adjutant. He was a colonel, a thin, gray, no-nonsense type. He'd already been briefed on my case, and he wasted no time on me. It was a short interview.

"Private," he said, "I'm sorry about this, but new orders have been issued. The Reds have increased their rebirth rate, and we have to match them. The standing order now is six revivals before retirement."

"But that order hadn't been issued at the time I was killed."

"It's retroactive," he said. "You have two deaths to go. Good-bye and good luck, Private."

And that was it. I should have known you can't get anywhere with top brass. They don't know how things are. They rarely get killed more than once, and they just don't understand how a man feels

after four times. So I went back to my trench.

I walked back slowly, past the poisoned barbed wire, thinking hard. I walked past something covered with a khaki tarpaulin stenciled *Secret Weapon*. Our sector is filled with secret weapons. They come out about once a week, and maybe one of them will win the war.

But right now I didn't care. I was thinking about the next stanza of that Emerson poem. It goes:

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

Old Emerson got it pretty right, because that's how it is after your fourth death. Nothing makes any difference, and everything seems pretty much the same. Don't get me wrong, I'm no cynic. I'm just saying that a man's viewpoint is bound to change after he's died four times.

At last I reached good old Trench 2645B-4, and greeted all the boys. I found out we were attacking again at dawn. I was still thinking.

I'm no quitter, but I figured four times dead was enough. In this attack, I decided I'd make sure I stayed dead. There would be no mistakes this time.

We moved out at first light, past the barbed wire and the rolling mines, into the no-man's-land between our trench and 2645B-5. This attack was being carried out in battalion strength, and we were all armed with the new homing bullets. We moved along pretty briskly for a while. Then the enemy really opened up.

We kept on gaining ground. Stuff was blowing up all around me, but I hadn't a scratch yet. I started to think we would make it this time. Maybe I wouldn't get killed.

Then I got it. An explosive bullet through the chest. Definitely a mortal wound. Usually after something like that hits you, you stay down. But not me. I wanted to make sure of staying dead this time. So I picked myself up and staggered forward, using my rifle as a crutch. I made another fifteen yards in the face of the damnedest cross-fire you've ever seen. Then I got it, and got it right. There was no mistaking it on this round.

I felt the explosive bullet slam into my forehead. There was the tiniest fraction of a second in which I could feel my brains boiling out, and I knew I was safe this time. The brahmins couldn't do anything about serious head injuries, and mine was really serious.

Then I died.

I recovered consciousness and looked up at the brahmins in their white gowns and gauze masks.

"How long was I dead?" I asked.

"Two hours."

Then I remembered. "But I got it in the head!"

The gauze masks wrinkled, and I knew they were grinning. "Secret weapon," one of them told me. "It's been in the works for close to three years. At last we and the engineers perfected a descrambler. Tremendous invention!"

"Yeah?" I said.

"At last medical science can treat serious head injuries," the brahmin told me. "Or any other kind

of injury. We can bring any man back now, just as long as we can collect seventy percent of his pieces and feed them to the descrambler. This is really going to cut down our losses. It may turn the tide of the whole war!"

"That's fine," I said.

"By the way," the brahmin told me, "you've been awarded a medal for your heroic advance under fire after receiving a mortal wound."

"That's nice," I said. "Did we take 2645B-5?"

"We took it this time. We're massing for an assault against Trench 2645B-6."

I nodded, and in a little while I was given my clothes and sent back to the front. Things have quieted down now, and I must admit it's kind of pleasant to be alive. Still, I think I've had all I want of it.

Now I've got just one more death to go before I'll have my six.

If they don't change the orders again.

THE STORE OF THE WORLDS

Mr. Wayne came to the end of the long, shoulder-high mound of gray rubble, and there was the Store of the Worlds. It was exactly as his friends had described; a small shack constructed of bits of lumber, parts of cars, a piece of galvanized iron, and a few rows of crumbling bricks, all daubed over with a watery blue paint.

Mr. Wayne glanced back down the long lane of rubble to make sure he hadn't been followed. He tucked his parcel more firmly under his arm; then, with a little shiver at his own audacity, he opened the door and slipped inside.

"Good morning," the proprietor said.

He, too, was exactly as described; a tall, crafty-looking old fellow with narrow eyes and a downcast mouth. His name was Tompkins. He sat in an old rocking chair, and perched on the back of it was a blue and green parrot. There was one other chair in the store, and a table. On the table was a rusted hypodermic.

"I've heard about your store from friends," Mr. Wayne said.

"Then you know my price," Tompkins said. "Have you brought it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wayne, holding up his parcel. "But I want to ask first—"

"They always want to ask," Tompkins said to the parrot, who blinked. "Go ahead, ask."

"I want to know what really happens."

Tompkins sighed. "What happens is this. You pay me my fee. I give you an injection which knocks you out. Then, with the aid of certain gadgets which I have in the back of the store, I liberate your mind."

Tompkins smiled as he said that, and his silent parrot seemed to smile, too.

"What happens then?" Mr. Wayne asked.

"Your mind, liberated from its body, is able to choose from the countless probability-worlds which the Earth casts off in every second of its existence."

Grinning now, Tompkins sat up in his rocking chair and began to show signs of enthusiasm.

"Yes, my friend, though you might not have suspected it, from the moment this battered Earth was born out of the sun's fiery womb, it cast off its alternate-probability worlds. Worlds without end, emanating from events large and small; every Alexander and every amoeba creating worlds, just as ripples will spread in a pond no matter how big or how small the stone you throw. Doesn't every object cast a shadow? Well, my friend, the Earth itself is four-dimensional; therefore it casts three-dimensional shadows, solid reflections of itself through every moment of its being. Millions, billions of Earths! An infinity of Earths! And your mind, liberated by me, will be able to select any of these worlds, and to live upon it for a while."

Mr. Wayne was uncomfortably aware that Tompkins sounded like a circus barker, proclaiming marvels that simply couldn't exist. But, Mr. Wayne reminded himself, things had happened within his own lifetime which he would never have believed possible. Never! So perhaps the wonders that Tompkins spoke of were possible, too.

Mr. Wayne said, "My friends also told me—"

"That I was an out-and-out fraud?" Tompkins asked.

"Some of them *implied* that," Mr. Wayne said cautiously. "But I try to keep an open mind. They also said—"

"I know what your dirty-minded friends said. They told you about the fulfillment of desire. Is that what you want to hear about?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wayne. "They told me that whatever I wished for—whatever I wanted—"

"Exactly," Tompkins said. "The thing could work in no other way. There are the infinite worlds to choose among. Your mind chooses, and is guided only by desire. Your deepest desire is the only thing that counts. If you have been harboring a secret dream of murder—"

"Oh, hardly, hardly!" cried Mr. Wayne.

"—then you will go to a world where you *can* murder, where you can roll in blood, where you can outdo Sade or Caesar, or whoever your idol may be. Suppose it's power you want? Then you'll choose a world where you are a god, literally and actually. A bloodthirsty Juggernaut, perhaps, or an all-wise Buddha."

"I doubt very much if I—"

"There are other desires, too," Tompkins said. "All heavens and all hells. Unbridled sexuality. Gluttony, drunkenness, love, fame—anything you want."

"Amazing!" said Mr. Wayne.

"Yes," Tompkins agreed. "Of course, my little list doesn't exhaust all the possibilities, all the combinations and permutations of desire. For all I know you might want a simple, placid, pastoral existence on a South Seas island among idealized natives."

"That sounds more like me," Mr. Wayne said, with a shy laugh.

"But who knows?" Tompkins asked. "Even you might not know what your true desires are. They might involve your own death."

"Does that happen often?" Mr. Wayne asked anxiously.

"Occasionally."

"I wouldn't want to die," Mr. Wayne said.

"It hardly ever happens," Tompkins said, looking at the parcel in Mr. Wayne's hands.

"If you say so ... But how do I know all this is real? Your fee is extremely high; it'll take everything I own. And for all I know, you'll give me a drug and I'll just *dream!* Everything I own just for a—a shot of heroin and a lot of fancy words!"

Tompkins smiled reassuringly. "The experience has no drug-like quality about it. And no sensation of a dream, either."

"If it's *true*," Mr. Wayne said, a little petulantly, "why can't I stay in the world of my desire for good?"

"I'm working on that," Tompkins said. "That's why I charge so high a fee; to get materials, to experiment. I'm trying to find a way of making the transition permanent. So far I haven't been able to loosen the cord that binds a man to his own Earth—and pulls him back to it. Not even the great mystics could cut that cord, except with death. But I still have my hopes."

"It would be a great thing if you succeeded," Mr. Wayne said politely.

"Yes it would!" Tompkins cried, with a surprising burst of passion. "For then I'd turn my wretched shop into an escape hatch! My process would be free then, free for everyone! Everyone would go to the Earth of their desires, the Earth that really suited them, and leave *this* damned place to the rats and worms—"

Tompkins cut himself off in midsentence and became icy calm. "But I fear my prejudices are showing. I can't offer a permanent escape from the Earth yet; not one that doesn't involve death. Perhaps I never will be able to. For now, all I can offer you is a vacation, a change, a taste of another world and a look at your own desires. You know my fee. I'll refund it if the experience isn't

satisfactory."

"That's good of you," Mr. Wayne said, quite earnestly. "But there's that other matter my friends told me about. The ten years off my life."

"That can't be helped," Tompkins said, "and can't be refunded. My process is a tremendous strain on the nervous system, and life-expectancy is shortened accordingly. That's one of the reasons why our so-called government has declared my process illegal."

"But they don't enforce the ban very firmly," Mr. Wayne said.

"No. Officially the process is banned as a harmful fraud. But officials are men, too. They'd like to leave this Earth, just like everyone else."

"The cost," Mr. Wayne mused, gripping his parcel tightly. "And ten years off my life! For the fulfillment of my secret desires ... Really, I must give this some thought."

"Think away," Tompkins said indifferently.

All the way home Mr. Wayne thought about it. When his train reached Port Washington, Long Island, he was still thinking. And driving his car from the station to his home he was still thinking about Tompkins's crafty old face, and worlds of probability, and the fulfillment of desire.

But when he stepped inside his house, those thoughts had to stop. Janet, his wife, wanted him to speak sharply to the maid, who had been drinking again. His son, Tommy, wanted help with the sloop, which was to be launched tomorrow. And his baby daughter wanted to tell about her day in kindergarten.

Mr. Wayne spoke pleasantly but firmly to the maid. He helped Tommy put the final coat of copper paint on the sloop's bottom, and he listened to Peggy tell about her adventures in the playground.

Later, when the children were in bed and he and Janet were alone in their living room, she asked him if something were wrong.

"Wrong?"

"You seem to be worried about something," Janet said. "Did you have a bad day at the office?"

"Oh, just the usual sort of thing ..."

He certainly was not going to tell Janet, or anyone else, that he had taken the day off and gone to see Tompkins in his crazy old Store of the Worlds. Nor was he going to speak about the right every man should have, once in his lifetime, to fulfill his most secret desires. Janet, with her good common sense, would never understand that.

The next days at the office were extremely hectic. All of Wall Street was in a mild panic over events in the Middle East and in Asia, and stocks were reacting accordingly. Mr. Wayne settled down to work. He tried not to think of the fulfillment of desire at the cost of everything he possessed, with ten years of his life thrown in for good measure. It was crazy! Old Tompkins must be insane!

On weekends he went sailing with Tommy. The old sloop was behaving very well, making practically no water through her bottom seams. Tommy wanted a new suit of racing sails, but Mr. Wayne sternly rejected that. Perhaps next year, if the market looked better. For now, the old sails would have to do.

Sometimes at night, after the children were asleep, he and Janet would go sailing. Long Island Sound was quiet then, and cool. Their boat glided past the blinking buoys, sailing toward the swollen yellow moon.

"I *know* something's on your mind," Janet said.

"Darling, please!"

"Is there something you're keeping from me?"

"Nothing!"

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"

"Absolutely sure."

"Then put your arms around me. That's right ..."

And the sloop sailed itself for a while.

Desire and fulfillment ... But autumn came, and the sloop had to be hauled. The stock market regained some stability, but Peggy caught the measles. Tommy wanted to know the differences between ordinary bombs, atom bombs, hydrogen bombs, cobalt bombs, and all the other kinds of bombs that were in the news. Mr. Wayne explained to the best of his ability. And the maid quit unexpectedly.

Secret desires were all very well. Perhaps he *did* want to kill someone, or live on a South Seas island. But there were responsibilities to consider. He had two growing children, and a better wife than he deserved.

Perhaps around Christmas time ...

But in midwinter there was a fire in the unoccupied guest bedroom due to defective wiring. The firemen put out the blaze without much damage, and no one was hurt. But it put any thought of Tompkins out of his mind for a while. First the bedroom had to be repaired, for Mr. Wayne was very proud of his gracious old house.

Business was still frantic and uncertain due to the international situation. Those Russians, those Arabs, those Greeks, those Chinese. The intercontinental missiles, the atom bombs, the sputniks ... Mr. Wayne spent long days at the office, and sometimes evenings, too. Tommy caught the mumps. A part of the roof had to be re-shingled. And then already it was time to consider the spring launching of the sloop.

A year had passed, and he'd had very little time to think of secret desires. But perhaps next year. In the meantime—

"Well?" said Tompkins. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, quite all right," Mr. Wayne said. He got up from the chair and rubbed his forehead.

"Do you want a refund?" Tompkins asked.

"No. The experience was quite satisfactory."

"They always are," Tompkins said, winking lewdly at the parrot. "Well, what was yours?"

"A world of the recent past," Mr. Wayne said.

"A lot of them are. Did you find out about your secret desire? Was it murder? Or a South Seas island?"

"I'd rather not discuss it," Mr. Wayne said, pleasantly but firmly.

"A lot of people won't discuss it with me," Tompkins said sulkily. "I'll be damned if I know why."

"Because—well, I think the world of one's secret desire feels sacred, somehow. No offense ... Do you think you'll ever be able to make it permanent? The world of one's choice, I mean?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "I'm trying. If I succeed, you'll hear about it. Everyone will."

"Yes, I suppose so." Mr. Wayne undid his parcel and laid its contents on the table. The parcel contained a pair of army boots, a knife, two coils of copper wire, and three small cans of corned beef.

Tompkins's eyes glittered for a moment. "Quite satisfactory," he said. "Thank you."

"Good-bye," said Mr. Wayne. "And thank *you*."

Mr. Wayne left the shop and hurried down to the end of the lane of gray rubble. Beyond it, as far as he could see, lay flat fields of rubble, brown and gray and black. Those fields, stretching to every horizon, were made of the twisted corpses of cities, the shattered remnants of trees, and the fine white ash that once was human flesh and bone.

"Well," Mr. Wayne said to himself, "at least we gave as good as we got."

That year in the past had cost him everything he owned, and ten years of life thrown in for good measure. Had it been a dream? It was still worth it! But now he had to put away all thought of Janet and the children. That was finished, unless Tompkins perfected his process. Now he had to think about his own survival.

With the aid of his wrist geiger he found a deactivated lane through the rubble. He'd better get back to the shelter before dark, before the rats came out. If he didn't hurry he'd miss the evening potato ration.

SHALL WE HAVE A LITTLE TALK?

1

THE landing was a piece of cake despite gravitational vagaries produced by two suns and six moons. Low-level cloud cover could have given him some trouble if Jackson had been coming in visually. But he considered that to be kid stuff. It was better and safer to plug in the computer and lean back and enjoy the ride.

The cloud cover broke up at two thousand feet. Jackson was able to confirm his earlier sighting: there was a city down there, just as sure as sure.

He was in one of the world's loneliest jobs; but his line of work, paradoxically enough, required an extremely gregarious man. Because of this built-in contradiction, Jackson was in the habit of talking to himself. Most of the men in his line of work did. Jackson would talk to anyone, human or alien, no matter what their size or shape or color.

It was what he was paid to do, and what he had to do anyhow. He talked when he was alone on the long interstellar runs, and he talked even more when he was with someone or something that would talk back. He figured he was lucky to be paid for his compulsions.

"And not just paid, either," he reminded himself. "*Well* paid, and with a bonus arrangement on top of that. And furthermore, this feels like my lucky planet. I feel like I could get rich on this one—unless they kill me down there, of course."

The lonely flights between the planets and the imminence of death were the only disadvantages of this job; but if the work weren't hazardous and difficult, the pay wouldn't be so good.

Would they kill him? You could never tell. Alien life forms were unpredictable—just like humans, only more so.

"But I don't think they'll kill me," Jackson said. "I just feel downright lucky today."

This simple philosophy had sustained him for years, across the endless lonely miles of space, and in and out of ten, twelve, twenty planets. He saw no reason to change his outlook now.

The ship landed. Jackson switched the status controls to standby.

He checked the analyzer for oxygen and trace-element content in the atmosphere, and took a quick survey of the local micro-organisms. The place was viable. He leaned back in his chair and waited. It didn't take long, of course, They—the locals, indigenes, autochthons, whatever you wanted to call them—came out of their city to look at the spaceship. And Jackson looked through the port at them.

"Well now," he said. "Seems like the alien life forms in this neck of the woods are honest-to-Joe humanoids. That means a five-thousand-dollar bonus for old Uncle Jackson."

The inhabitants of the city were bipedal monocephaloids. They had the appropriate number of fingers, noses, eyes, ears, and mouths. Their skin was a flesh-colored beige, their lips were a faded red, their hair was black, brown, or red.

"Shucks, they're just like home folks!" Jackson said. "Hell, I ought to get an extra bonus for that. Humanoidissimus, eh?"

The aliens wore clothes. Some of them carried elaborately carved lengths of wood like swagger sticks. The women decorated themselves with carved and enameled ornaments. At a flying guess, Jackson ranked them about equivalent to Late Bronze Age on Earth.

The talked and gestured among themselves. Their language was, of course, incomprehensible to Jackson; but that didn't matter. The important thing was that they *had* a language and that their speech sounds could be produced by his vocal apparatus.

"Not like on that heavy planet last year," Jackson said. "Those supersonic sons of bitches! I had to wear special earphones and mike, and it was a hundred and ten in the shade."

The aliens were waiting for him, and Jackson knew it. That first moment of actual contact—it always was a nervous business.

That's when they were most apt to let you have it.

Reluctantly he moved to the hatch, undogged it, rubbed his eyes, and cleared his throat. He managed to produce a smile. He told himself, "Don't get sweaty; 'member, you're just a little old interstellar wanderer—kind of galactic vagabond—to extend the hand of friendship and all that jazz. You've just dropped in for a little talk, nothing more. Keep on believing that, sweety, and the extraterrestrial Johns will believe right along with you. Remember Jackson's Law: all intelligent life forms share the divine faculty of gullibility; which means that the triple-tongued Thung of Orangus V can be conned out of his skin just as Joe Doakes of St. Paul."

And so, wearing a brave, artificial little smile, Jackson swung the port open and stepped out to have a little talk.

"Well now, how y'all?" Jackson asked at once, just to hear the sound of his own voice.

The nearest aliens shrank away from him. Nearly all of them were frowning. Several of the younger ones carried bronze knives in a forearm scabbard. These were clumsy weapons, but as effective as anything ever invented. The aliens started to draw.

"Now take it easy," Jackson said, keeping his voice light and unalarmed.

They drew their knives and began to edge forward. Jackson stood his ground, waiting, ready to bolt through the hatch like a jet-propelled jackrabbit, hoping he could make it.

Then a third man (might as well call them "men," Jackson decided) stepped in front of the belligerent two. This one was older. He spoke rapidly. He gestured. The two with the knives looked.

"That's right," Jackson said encouragingly. "Take a good look. Heap big spaceship. Plenty strong medicine. Vehicle of great power, fabricated by a real advanced technology. Sort of makes you stop and think, doesn't it?"

It did.

The aliens had stopped; and if not thinking, they were at least doing a great deal of talking. They pointed at the ship, then back at their city.

"You're getting the idea," Jackson told them. "Power speaks a universal language, eh, cousins?"

He had been witness to many of these scenes on many different planets. He could nearly write their dialogue for them. It usually went like this:

Intruder lands in outlandish space vehicle, thereby eliciting (1) curiosity, (2) fear, and (3) hostility. After some minutes of awed contemplation, one autochthon usually says to his friend: "Hey, that damned metal thing packs one hell of a lot of power."

"You're right, Herbie," his friend Fred, the second autochthon, replies.

"You bet I'm right," Herbie says. "And, hell, with that much power and technology and stuff, this son-of-a-gun could like *enslave* us. I mean he really could."

"You've hit it, Herbie, that's just exactly what could happen."

"So what I say," Herbie continues, "I say, let's not take any risks. I mean, *sure*, he *looks* friendly enough, but he's just got too damned much *power*, and that's not right. And right now is the best chance we'll ever get to take him on account of he's just standing there waiting for like an ovation or

something. So let's put this bastard out of his misery, and then we can talk the whole thing over and see how it stacks up situationwise."

"By Jesus, I'm with you!" cries Fred. Others signify their assent.

"Good for you, lads," cries Herbie. "Let's wade in and take this alien joker like *now*!"

So they start to make their move; but suddenly, at the last second, Old Doc (the third autochthon) intervenes, saying, "Hold it a minute, boys, we can't do it like that. For one thing, we got laws around here—"

"To hell with that," says Fred (a born troublemaker and somewhat simple to boot).

"—and aside from the laws, it would be just too damned dangerous for *us*."

"Me 'n' Fred here ain't scared," says valiant Herb. "Maybe you better go take in a movie or something, Doc. Us guys'll handle this."

"I was not referring to a short-range personal danger," Old Doc says scornfully. "What I fear is the destruction of our city, the slaughter of our loved ones, and the annihilation of our culture."

Herb and Fred stop. "What you talking about. Doc? He's just one stinking alien; you push a knife in his guts, he'll bleed like anyone else."

"Fools! *Schlemiels!*" thunders wise Old Doc. "Of course, you can kill him! But what happens after that?"

"Huh?" says Fred, squinting his china-blue pop eyes.

"Idiots! *Cochons!* You think this is the only spaceship these aliens got? You think they don't even know whereabouts this guy has gone? Man, you gotta assume they got *plenty* more ships where this one came from, and you gotta also assume that they'll be damned mad if this ship doesn't show up when it's supposed to, and you gotta assume that when these aliens learn the score, they're gonna be damned sore and buzz back here and stomp on everything and everybody."

"How come I gotta assume that?" asks feeble-witted Fred.

"'Cause it's what *you'd* do in a deal like that, right?"

"I guess maybe I would at that," says Fred with a sheepish grin. "Yeah, I just might do that little thing. But look, maybe *they* wouldn't."

"Maybe, maybe," mimics wise Old Doc. "Well, baby, we can't risk the whole ball game on a goddamned *maybe*. We can't afford to kill this alien joker on the chance that *maybe* his people wouldn't do what any reasonable-minded guy would do, which is, namely, to blow us all to hell."

"Well, I suppose we maybe can't," Herbie says. "But Doc, what *can* we do?"

"Just wait and see what he wants."

2

A scene very much like that, according to reliable reconstruction, had been enacted at least thirty or forty times. It usually resulted in a policy of wait and see. Occasionally, the contactor from Earth was killed before wise counsel could prevail; but Jackson was paid to take risks like that.

Whenever the contactor was killed, retribution followed with swift and terrible inevitability. Also with regret, of course, because Earth was an extremely civilized place and accustomed to living within the law. No civilized, law-abiding race likes to commit genocide. In fact, the folks on Earth consider genocide a very unpleasant matter, and they don't like to read about it or anything like it in their morning papers. Envoys must be protected, of course, and murder must be punished; everybody knows that. But it still doesn't feel nice to read about a genocide over your morning coffee. News like

that can spoil a man's entire day. Three or four genocides and a man just might get angry enough to switch his vote.

Fortunately, there was never much occasion for that sort of mess. Aliens usually caught on pretty fast. Despite the language barrier, aliens learned that you simply *don't* kill Earthmen.

And then, later, bit by bit, they learned all the rest.

The hotheads had sheathed their knives. Everybody was smiling except Jackson, who was grinning like a hyena. The aliens were making graceful arm and leg motions, probably of welcome.

"Well, that's real nice," Jackson said, making a few graceful gestures of his own. "Makes me feel real to-home. And now, suppose you take me to your leader, show me the town, and all that jazz. Then I'll set myself down and figure out that lingo of yours, and we'll have a little talk. And after that, everything will proceed splendidly. *En avant!*"

So saying, Jackson stepped out at a brisk pace in the direction of the city. After a brief hesitation, his newfound friends fell into step behind him.

Everything was moving according to plan.

Jackson, like all the other contactors, was a polyglot of singular capabilities. As basic equipment, he had an eidetic memory and an extremely discriminating ear. More important, he possessed a startling aptitude for language and an uncanny intuition for meaning. When Jackson came up against an incomprehensible tongue, he picked out, quickly and unerringly, the significant units, the fundamental building blocks of the language. Quite without effort he sorted vocalizations into cognitive, volitional, and emotional aspects of speech. Grammatical elements presented themselves at once to his practiced ear. Prefixes and suffixes were no trouble; word sequence, pitch, and reduplication were no sweat. He didn't know much about the science of linguistics, but he didn't need to know. Jackson was a natural. Linguistics had been developed to describe and explain things which he knew intuitively.

He had not yet encountered the language which he could not learn. He never really expected to find one. As he often told his friends in the Forked Tongue Club in New York, "Waal, shukins, there just really ain't nuthin' *tough* about them alien tongues. Leastwise, not the ones I've run across. I mean that sincerely. I mean to tell you, boys, that the man who can express himself in Sioux or Khmer ain't going to encounter too much trouble out there amongst the stars."

And so it had been, to date ...

Once in the city, there were many tedious ceremonies which Jackson had to endure. They stretched on for three days—about par for the course; it wasn't every day that a traveler from space came in for a visit. So naturally enough every mayor, governor, president, and alderman, *and* their wives, wanted to shake his hand. It was all very understandable, but Jackson resented the waste of his time. He had work to do, some of it not very pleasant, and the sooner he got started, the quicker it would be over.

On the fourth day he was able to reduce the official nonsense to a minimum. That was the day on which he began in earnest to learn the local language.

A language, as any linguist will tell you, is undoubtedly the most beautiful creation one is ever likely to encounter. But with that beauty goes a certain element of danger.

Language might aptly be compared to the sparkling, ever-changing face of the sea. Like the sea, you never know what reefs may be concealed in its pellucid depths. The brightest water hides the most treacherous shoals.

Jackson, well prepared for trouble, encountered none at first. The main language (Hon) of this

planet (Na) was spoken by the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants (En-a-To-Na—literally, men of the Na, or Naians, as Jackson preferred to think of them). Hon seemed quite a straightforward affair. It used one term for one concept, and allowed no fusions, juxtapositions, or agglutinations. Concepts were built up by sequences of simple words ("spaceship" was *ho-pa-aie-an*—boat-flying-outer-sky). Thus, Hon was very much like Chinese and Annamite on Earth. Pitch differences were employed not only intentionally to differentiate between homonyns, but also positionally, to denote gradations of "perceived realism," bodily discomfort, and three classes of pleasurable expectation. All of which was mildly interesting but of no particular difficulty to a competent linguist.

To be sure, a language like Hon was rather a bore because of the long word-lists one had to memorize. But pitch and position could be fun, as well as being absolutely essential if one wanted to make any sense out of the sentence units. So, taken all in all, Jackson was not dissatisfied, and he absorbed the language as quickly as it could be given to him.

It was a proud day for Jackson, about a week later, when he could say to his tutor: "A very nice and pleasant good morning to you, most estimable and honored tutor, and how is your blessed health upon this glorious day?"

"Felicitations most *ird wunk*!" the tutor replied with a smile of deep warmth. "Your accent, dear pupil, is superb! Positively *gor nak*, in fact, and your grasp of my dear mother tongue is little short of *ur nak tai*."

Jackson glowed all over from the gentle old tutor's compliments. He felt quite pleased with himself. Of course, he hadn't recognized several words; *ird wunk* and *ur nak tai* sounded faintly familiar, but *gor nak* was completely unknown. Still, lapses were expected of a beginner in any language. He did know enough to understand the Naians and to make himself understood by them. And that was what his job required.

He returned to his spaceship that afternoon. The hatch had been standing open during his entire stay on Na, but he found that not a single article had been stolen. He shook his head ruefully at this but refused to let it upset him. He loaded his pockets with a variety of objects and sauntered back to the city. He was ready to perform the final and most important part of his job.

3

In the heart of the business district, at the intersection of Um and Alhretto, he found what he was looking for: a real-estate office. He entered and was taken to the office of Mr. Erum, a junior partner of the firm.

"Well, well, well, well!" Erum said, shaking hands heartily. "This is a real honor, sir, a very considerable and genuine privilege. Are you thinking of acquiring a piece of property?"

"That was my intention," Jackson said. "Unless, of course, you have discriminatory laws that forbid your selling to a foreigner."

"No difficulty there," Erum said. "In fact, it'll be a veritable *orai* of a pleasure to have a man from your distant and glorious civilization in our midst."

Jackson restrained a snicker. "The only other difficulty I can imagine is the question of legal tender. I don't have any of your currency, of course; but I have certain quantities of gold, platinum, diamonds, and other objects which are considered valuable on Earth."

"They are considered valuable here, too," Erum said. "Quantities, did you say? My dear sir, we will have no difficulties; not even a *blaggle* shall *mit* or *ows*, as the poet said."

"Quite so," Jackson replied. Erum was using some words he didn't know, but that didn't matter. The main drift was clear enough. "Now, suppose we begin with a nice industrial site. After all, I'll have to do something with my time. And after that, we can pick out a house."

"Most decidedly *prominex*," Erum said gaily. "Suppose I just *raish* through my listings here ... Yes, what do you say to a *bromicaine* factory? It's in a first-class condition and could easily be converted to *vor* manufacture or used as it is."

"Is there any real market for *bromicaine*?" Jackson asked.

"Well, bless my *muergentan*, of course there is! *Bromicaine* is indispensable, though its sales are seasonable. You see, refined *bromicaine*, or *ariisi*, is used by the *protigash* devolvers, who of course harvest by the solstice season, except in those branches of the industry that have switched over to *ticothene revature*. Those from a steadily—"

"Fine, fine," Jackson said. He didn't care what a *bromicaine* was and never expected to see one. As long as it was a gainful employment of some kind, it filled his specifications.

"I'll buy it," he said.

"You won't regret it," Erum told him. "A good *bromicaine* factory is a *garveldis hagatis*, and *menifoy* as well."

"Sure," Jackson said, wishing that he had a more extensive Hon vocabulary. "How much?"

"Well, sir, the price is no difficulty. But first you'll have to fill out the *ollanbrit* form. It is just a few *sken* questions which *ny naga* of everyone."

Erum handed Jackson the form. The first question read: "Have you, now or at any past time, *elikated mushkies forsically*? State date of all occurrences. If no occurrences, state the reason for *transgrishal reduct* as found."

Jackson read no further. "What does it mean," he asked Erum, "to *elikate mushkies forsically*?"

"Mean?" Erum smiled uncertainly. "Why, it means exactly what it says. Or so I would imagine."

"I meant," Jackson said, "that I do not understand the words. Could you explain them to me?"

"Nothing simpler, Erum replied. "To *elikate mushkies* is almost the same as a *bifur probishkai*."

"I beg your pardon?" Jackson said.

"It means—well, to *elikate* is really rather simple, though perhaps not in the eyes of the law. *Scorbadising* is a form of *elikation*, and so is *manruv garing*. Some say that when we breathe *drorsically* in the evening *subsis*, we are actually *elikating*. Personally, I consider that a bit fanciful."

"Let's try *mushkies*," Jackson suggested.

"By all means, let's!" Erum replied, with a coarse boom of laughter. "If only one could—eh!" He dug Jackson in the ribs with a sly elbow.

"Hm, yes," Jackson replied coldly. "Perhaps you could tell me what, exactly, a *mushkie* is?"

"Of course. As it happens, there is no such thing," Erum replied. "Not in the singular, at any rate. One *mushkie* would be a logical fallacy, don't you see?"

"I'll take your word for it. What *are mushkies*?"

"Well, primarily, they're the object of *elikation*. Secondarily, they are half-sized wooden sandals which are used to stimulate erotic fantasies among the Kutor religionists."

"Now we're getting someplace!" Jackson cried.

"Only if your tastes happen to run that way," Erum answered with discernible coldness.

"I meant in terms of understanding the question on the form—"

"Of course, excuse me," Erum said. "But you see, the question asks if you have ever *elikated mushkies forsically*. And that makes all the difference."

"Does it really?"

"Of course! The modification changes the entire meaning."

"I was afraid that it would," Jackson said. "I don't suppose you could explain what *forsically* means?"

"I certainly can!" Erum said. "Our conversation now could—with a slight assist from the *deme* imagination—be termed a '*forsically designed* talk.'"

"Ah," said Jackson.

"Quite so," said Erum. "*Forsically* is a mode, a manner. It means 'spiritually-forward-leading-by-way-of-fortuitous-friendship.'"

"That's a little more like it," Jackson said. "In that case, when one *elikates mushkies forsically* —"

"I'm terribly afraid you're on the wrong track," Erum said. "The definition I gave you applies only to conversations. It is something rather different when one speaks of *mushkies*."

"What does it mean then?"

"Well, it means—or rather it *expresses*—an advanced and intensified case of *mushkie elikidation*, but with a definite *nmogmetic* bias. I consider it a rather unfortunate phraseology, personally."

"How would you put it?"

"I'd lay it on the line and to hell with the fancy talk," Erum said toughly. "I'd come right out and say: 'Have you now or at any other time *dunfiglers voc* in illegal, immoral, or *insirtis* circumstances, with or without the aid and/or consent of a *brachniian*? If so, state when and why. If not, state *neugris kris* and why not.'"

"That's how you'd put it, huh?" Jackson said.

"Sure, I would," Erum said defiantly. "These forms are for adults, aren't they? So why not come right out and call a *spigler* a *spey*? Everybody *dunfiglers voc* some of the time, and so what? No one's feelings are ever hurt by it, for heaven's sake. I mean, after all, it simply involves oneself and a twisted old piece of wood, so why should anyone care?"

"Wood?" Jackson echoed.

"Yes, *wood*. A commonplace, dirty old piece of wood. Or at least that's all it would be if people didn't get their feelings so ridiculously involved."

"What do they do with the wood?" Jackson asked quickly.

"*Do* with it? Nothing much, when you come right down to it. But the religious aura is simply too much for our so-called intellectuals. They are unable, in my opinion, to isolate the simple primordial fact—*wood*—from the cultural *volturneiss* which surrounds it at *festerhiss*, and to some extent at *uuis*, too."

"That's how intellectuals are," Jackson said. "But *you* can isolate it, and you find—"

"I find it's really nothing to get excited about. I really mean that. I mean to say that a cathedral, viewed correctly, is no more than a pile of rocks, and a forest is just an assembly of atoms. Why should we see this case differently? I mean, really, you could *elikate mushkies forsically* without even *using* wood! What do you think of that?"

"I'm impressed," Jackson said.

"Don't get me wrong! I'm not saying it would be *easy*, or natural, or even *right*. But still, you damned well could! Why, you could substitute *cormed grayti* and still come out all right!" Erum paused and chuckled. "You'd look foolish, but you'd still come out all right."

"Very interesting," Jackson said.

"I'm afraid I became a bit vehement," Erum said, wiping his forehead. "Was I talking very

loudly? Do you think perhaps I was overheard?"

"Of course not. I found it all very interesting. I must leave just now, Mr. Erum, but I'll be back tomorrow to fill out that form and buy the property."

"I'll hold it for you," Erum said, rising and shaking Jackson's hand warmly. "And I want to thank you. It isn't often that I have the opportunity for this kind of frank no-holds-barred conversation."

"I found it very instructive," Jackson said. He left Erum's office and walked slowly back to his ship. He was disturbed, upset, and annoyed. Linguistic incomprehension irked him, no matter how comprehensible it might be. He *should* have been able to figure out, somehow, how one went about *elikating mushkies forsically*.

Never mind, he told himself. You'll work it out tonight, Jackson baby, and then you'll go back in there and cannonball through them forms. So don't get het up over it, man.

He'd work it out. He damned well had to work it out, as he had to own a piece of property.

That was the second part of his job.

Earth had come a long way since the bad old days of naked, aggressive warfare. According to the history books, a ruler back in those ancient times could simply send out his troops to seize whatever the ruler wanted. And if any of the folks at home had the temerity to ask why he wanted it, the ruler could have them beheaded or locked up in a dungeon or sewn up in a sack and thrown into the sea. And he wouldn't even feel guilty about doing any of those things because he invariably believed that he was right and they were wrong.

This policy, technically called the *droit de seigneur*, was one of the most remarkable features of the *laissez-faire capitalism* which the ancients knew.

But, down the slow passage of centuries, cultural processes were inexorably at work. A new ethic came into the world; and slowly but surely, a sense of fair play and justice was bred into the human race. Rulers came to be chosen by ballot and were responsive to the desires of the electorate. Conceptions of Justice, Mercy, and Pity came to the forefront of men's minds, ameliorating the old law of tooth and talon and amending the savage bestiality of the ancient time of unreconstruction.

The old days were gone for ever. Today, no ruler could simply *take*; the voters would never stand for it.

Nowadays one had to have an excuse for taking.

Like for example a Terran citizen who happened to own property all legal and aboveboard on an alien planet, and who urgently needed and requested Terran military assistance in order to protect himself, his home, his means of a legitimate livelihood ...

But first he had to own that property. He had to really own it, to protect himself from the bleeding-hearts Congressmen and the soft-on-aliens newsmen who always started an investigation whenever Earth took charge of another planet.

To provide a legal basis for conquest—that was what the contactors were for.

"Jackson," Jackson said to himself, "you gonna git yourself that li'l ole *bromicaine* factory tomorrow and you gonna own it without let or hindrance. You heah me, boy? I mean it sincerely."

On the morrow, shortly before noon, Jackson was back in the city. Several hours of intensive study and a long consultation with his tutor had sufficed to show him where he had gone wrong.

It was simple enough. He had merely been a trifle hasty in assuming an extreme and invariant isolating technique in the Hon use of radicals. He had thought, on the basis of his early studies, that

word meaning and word order were the only significant factors required for an understanding of the language. But that wasn't so. Upon further examination, Jackson found that the Hon language had some unexpected resources: affixation, for example, and an elementary form of reduplication. Yesterday he hadn't even been prepared for any morphological inconsistencies; when they had occurred, he had found himself in semantic difficulties.

The new forms were easy enough to learn. The trouble was, they were thoroughly illogical and contrary to the entire spirit of Hon.

One word produced by one sound and bearing one meaning—that was the rule he had previously deduced. But now he discovered eighteen important exceptions—compounds produced by a variety of techniques, each of them with a list of modifying suffixes. For Jackson, this was as odd as stumbling across a grove of palm trees in Antarctica.

He learned the eighteen exceptions, and thought about the article he would write when he finally got home.

And the next day, wiser and warier, Jackson strode meaningfully back to the city.

4

In Erum's office, he filled out the Government forms with ease. That first question—"Have you, now or at any past time, *elikated mushkies forsically*?"—he could now answer with an honest no. The plural "*mushkies*" in its primary meaning, represented in this context the singular "woman." (The singular "*mushkie*s" used similarly would denote an uncorporeal state of femininity.)

Elikation was, of course, the role of sexual termination, unless one employed the modifier "*forsically*." If one did, this quiet term took on a charged meaning in this particular context, tantamount to edematous polysexual advocation.

Thus, Jackson could honestly write that, as he was not a Naian, he had never had that particular urge.

It was as simple as that. Jackson was annoyed at himself for not having figured it out on his own.

He filled in the rest of the questions without difficulty, and handed the paper back to Erum.

"That's really quite *skoe*," Erum said. "Now, there are just a few more simple items for us to complete. The first we can do immediately. After that, I will arrange a brief official ceremony for the Property Transferral Act, and that will be followed by several other small bits of business. All of it should take no more than a day or so, and then the property will be all yours."

"Sure, kid, that's great," Jackson said. He wasn't bothered by the delays. Quite the contrary, he had expected many more of them. On most planets, the locals caught on quickly to what was happening. It took no great reasoning power to figure out that Earth wanted what she wanted, but wanted it in a legalistic manner.

As for why she wanted it that way—that wasn't too hard to fathom, either. A great majority of Terrans were idealists, and they believed fervently in concepts such as truth, justice, mercy, and the like. And not only did they believe, they also let those noble concepts guide their actions—except when it would be inconvenient or unprofitable. When that happened, they acted expediently, but continued to talk moralistically. This meant that they were "hypocrites" —a term which every race has its counterpart of.

Terrans wanted what they wanted, but they also wanted that what they wanted should look nice. This was a lot to expect sometimes, especially when what they wanted was ownership of someone

else's planet. But in one way or another, they usually got it.

Most alien races realized that overt resistance was impossible and so resorted to various stalling tactics.

Sometimes they refused to sell, or they required an infinite multiplicity of forms or the approval of some local official who was always absent. But for each ploy the contactor always had a suitable counterploy.

Did they refuse to sell property on racial grounds? The laws of Earth specifically forbade such practices, and the Declaration of Sentient Rights stated the freedom of all sentients to live and work wherever they pleased. This was a freedom that Terra would fight for, if anyone forced her to.

Were they stalling? The Terran Doctrine of Temporal Propriety would not allow it.

Was the necessary official absent? The Uniform Earth Code Against Implicit Sequestration in Acts of Omission expressly forbade such a practice. And so on and so on. It was a game of wits Earth invariably won, for the strongest is usually judged the cleverest.

But the Naians weren't even *trying* to fight back. Jackson considered that downright despicable.

The exchange of Naian currency for Terran platinum was completed, and Jackson was given his change in crisp fifty-Vrso bills. Erum beamed with pleasure and said, "Now, Mr. Jackson, we can complete today's business if you will kindly *trombramcthulanchierir* in the usual manner."

Jackson turned, his eyes narrowed, and his mouth compressed into a bloodless downward-curving line.

"What did you say?"

"I merely asked you to—"

"I know what you asked! But what does it mean?"

"Well, it means—it means—' Erum laughed weakly. "It means exactly what it says. That is to say —*ethybolically* speaking—"

Jackson said in a low, dangerous voice, "Give me a synonym."

"There is no synonym," Erum said.

"Baby, you better come up with one anyhow," Jackson said, his hand closing over Erum's throat.

"Stop! Wait! Ulp!" Erum cried. "Mr. Jackson, I beg of you! How can there be a synonym when there is one and only one term for the thing expressed—if I may so express it?"

"You're putting me on!" Jackson howled. "And you better quit it, on account of we got laws against willful obfuscation, intentional obstructionism, implicit superimposition, and other stuff like you're doing. You hear me?"

"I hear you." Erum trembled.

"Then hear this: *stop agglutinating*, you devious dog! You've got a perfectly ordinary run-of-the-mill analytical-type language, distinguished only by its extreme isolating tendency. And when you got a language like that, man, then you simply don't *agglutinate* a lot of big messy compounds. Get me?"

"Yes, yes," Erum cried. "But believe me, I don't intend to *numniscaterate* in the slightest! Not *noniskakkekaki*, and you really must *debruchili* that!"

Jackson drew back his fist, but got himself under control in time. It was unwise to hit aliens if there was any possibility that they were telling the truth. Folks on Terra didn't like it. His pay could be docked; and if, by some unlucky chance, he killed Erum, he could be slapped with a six-month jail sentence.

But still ...

"I'll find out if you're lying or not!" Jackson screamed, and stormed out of the office.

He walked for nearly an hour, mingling with the crowds in the slum quarters of Grath-Eth, below the gray, evil-smelling Ungperdis. No one paid any attention to him. To all outward appearances, he could have been a Naian, just as any Naian could have been a Terran.

Jackson located a cheerful saloon on the corner of Niis and Da Streets and went in.

It was quiet and masculine inside. Jackson ordered a local variety of beer. When it was served, he said to the bartender, "Funny thing happened to me the other day."

"Yeah?" said the bartender.

"Yeah, really," Jackson said. "I had this big business deal on, see, and then at the last minute they asked to *trombramcthulanchierir* in the usual manner."

He watched the bartender's face carefully. A faint expression of puzzlement crossed the man's stolid features.

"So why didn't you?" the bartender asked.

"You mean *you* would have?"

"Sure I would have. Hell, it's the standard *cathanpriptiaia*, ain't it?"

"Course it is," one of the loungers at the bar said. "Unless, of course, you suspected they was trying to *numniscaterate*."

"No, I don't think they were trying anything like that," Jackson said in a flat low, lifeless voice. He paid for his drink and started to leave.

"Hey," the bartender called after him, "you sure they wasn't *noniskakkekaki*?"

"You never know," Jackson said, walking slump-shouldered into the street.

Jackson trusted his instincts, both with languages and with people. His instincts told him now that the Naians were straight and were not practicing an elaborate deception on him. Erum had not been inventing new words for the sake of wilful confusion. He had been really speaking the Hon language as he knew it.

But if that were true, then Na was a very strange language. In fact, it was downright eccentric. And its implications were not merely curious. They were disastrous.

5

That evening Jackson went back to work. He discovered a further class of exceptions which he had not known or even suspected. That was a group of twenty-nine multivalued potentiators. These words, meaningless in themselves, acted to elicit a complicated and discordant series of shadings from other words. Their particular type of potentiation varied according to their position in the sentence.

Thus, when Erum had asked him "to *trombramcthulanchierir* in the usual manner," he had merely wanted Jackson to make an obligatory ritual obeisance. This consisted of clasping his hands behind his neck and rocking back on his heels. He was required to perform this action with an expression of definite yet modest pleasure, in accordance with the totality of the situation, and also in accord with the state of his stomach and nerves and with his religion and ethical code, and bearing in mind minor temperamental differences due to fluctuations in heat and humidity, and not forgetting the virtues of patience, similitude, and forgiveness.

It was all quite understandable. And all completely contradictory to everything Jackson had previously learned about Hon.

It was more than contradictory; it was unthinkable, impossible, and entirely out of order. It was as

if, having discovered palm trees in frigid Antarctica, he had further found that the fruit of these trees was not coconuts, but muscatel grapes.

It couldn't be—but it was.

Jackson did what was required of him. When he had finished *trombramcthulanchieriring* in the usual manner, he had only to get through the official ceremony and the several small requirements after it.

Erum assured him that it was all quite simple, but Jackson suspected that he might somehow have difficulties.

So, in preparation, he put in three days of hard work acquiring a real mastery of the twenty-nine exceptional potentiators, together with their most common positions and their potentiating effect in each of these positions. He finished, bone-weary and with his irritability index risen to 97.3620 on the Grafheimer scale. An impartial observer might have noticed an ominous gleam in his china-blue eyes.

Jackson had had it. He was sick of the Hon language and of all things Naian. He had the vertiginous feeling that the more he learned, the less he knew. It was downright perverse.

"Hokay," Jackson said, to himself and to the universe a large. "I have learned the Naian language, and I have learned a set of completely inexplicable exceptions, *and* I have *also* learned a further and even more contradictory set of exceptions to the exceptions."

Jackson paused and in a very low voice said: "I have learned an *exceptional* number of exceptions. Indeed, an impartial observer might think that this language is composed of nothing *but* exceptions.

"But *that*," he continued, "is damned well impossible, unthinkable, and unacceptable. A language is by God and by definition *systematic*, which means it's gotta follow some kind of *rules*. Otherwise, nobody can't understand *nobody*. That's the way it works, and that's the way it's gotta be. And if anyone thinks they can horse around linguisticwise with Fred C. Jackson—"

Here Jackson paused and drew the blaster from his holster. He checked the charge, snapped off the safety, and replaced the weapon.

"Just better no one give old Jackson no more double-talking," old Jackson muttered. "Because the next alien who tries it is going to get a three-inch circle drilled through his lousy, cheating guts."

So saying, Jackson marched back to the city. He was feeling decidedly lightheaded, but absolutely determined. His job was to steal this planet out from under its inhabitants in a legal manner, and in order to do that he had to make sense out of their language. Therefore, in one way or another, he was going to *make* sense. Either that, or he was going to make some corpses.

At this point, he didn't much care which.

Erum was in his office, waiting for him. With him were the mayor, the president of the City Council, the borough president, two aldermen, and the director of the Board of Estimates. All of them were smiling—affably, albeit nervously. Strong spirits were present on a sideboard, and there was a subdued air of fellowship in the room.

All in all, it looked as if Jackson were being welcomed as a new and highly respected property owner, an adornment to Fakka. Aliens took it that way sometimes: made the best of a bad bargain by trying to ingratiate themselves with the Inevitable Earthman.

"*Mun*," said Erum, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

"Same to you, kid," Jackson said. He had no idea what the word meant. Nor did he care. He had plenty of other Naian words to choose among, and he had the determination to force matters to a conclusion.

"*Mun!*" said the mayor.

"Thanks, pop," said Jackson.

"*Mun!*" declared the other officials.

"Glad you boys feel that way," said Jackson. He turned to Erum. "Well, let's get it over with, okay?"

"*Mun-mun-mun*," Erum replied. "*Mun, mun-mun*."

Jackson stared at him for several seconds. Then he said, in a low, controlled voice, "Erum, baby, just exactly *what* are you trying to say to me?"

"*Mun, mun, mun*," Erum stated firmly. "*Mun, mun mun mun. Mun mun*." He paused, and in a somewhat nervous voice asked the mayor: "*Mun, mun?*"

"*Mun* ... mun mun," the mayor replied firmly, and the other officials nodded. They all turned to Jackson.

"*Mun, mun-mun?*" Erum asked him, tremulously, but with dignity.

Jackson was numbed speechless. His face turned a choleric red and a large blue vein started to pulse in his neck. But he managed to speak slowly, calmly, and with infinite menace.

"Just *what*," he said, "do you lousy third-rate yokels think you're pulling?"

"*Mun-mun?*" the mayor asked Erum.

"*Mun-mun, mun-mun-mun*," Erum replied quickly, making a gesture of incomprehension.

"You better talk sense," Jackson said. His voice was still low, but the vein in his neck writhed like a firehose under pressure.

"*Mun!*" one of the aldermen said quickly to the borough president.

"*Mun mun-mun mun?*" the borough president answered piteously, his voice breaking on the last word.

"So you won't talk sense, huh?"

"*Mun! Mun-mun!*" the mayor cried, his face gone ashen with fright.

The others looked and saw Jackson's hand clearing the blaster and taking aim at Erum's chest.

"Quit horsing around!" Jackson commanded. The vein in his neck pulsed like a python in travail.

"*Mun-mun-mun!*" Erum pleaded, dropping to his knees.

"*Mun-mun-mun!*" the mayor shrieked, rolling his eyes and fainting.

"You get it now," Jackson said to Erum. His finger whitened on the trigger.

Erum, his teeth chattering, managed to gasp out a strangled "*Mun-mun, mun?*" But then his nerves gave way and he waited for death with jaw agape and eyes unfocused.

Jackson took up the last fraction of slack in the trigger. Then, abruptly, he let up and shoved the blaster back in its holster.

"*Mun, mun!*" Erum managed to say.

"Shaddap," Jackson said. He stepped back and glared at the cringing Naian officials.

He would have dearly loved to blast them all. But he couldn't do it. Jackson had to come to a belated acknowledgement of an unacceptable reality.

His impeccable linguist's ear had heard, and his polyglot brain had analyzed. Dismayingly, he had realized that the Naians were not trying to put anything over on him. They were speaking not nonsense, but a true language.

This language was made up at present of the single sound "*mun*." This sound could carry an extensive repertoire of meanings through variations in pitch and pattern, changes in stress and quantity, alteration of rhythm and repetition, and through accompanying gestures and facial expressions.

A language consisting of infinite variations on a single word! Jackson didn't want to believe it, but he was too good a linguist to doubt the evidence of his own trained senses.

He could learn this language, of course.

But by the time he had learned it, what would it have changed into?

Jackson sighed and rubbed his face wearily. In a sense it was inevitable. All languages change. But on Earth and the few dozen worlds she had contacted, the languages changed with relative slowness.

On Na, the rate of change was faster. Quite a bit faster.

The Na language changed as fashions change on Earth, only faster. It changed as prices change or as the weather changes. It changed endlessly and incessantly, in accordance with unknown rules and invisible principles. It changed its form as an avalanche changes its shape. Compared with it, English was like a glacier.

The Na language was, truly and monstrously, a simulacrum of Heraclitus's river. You cannot step into the same river twice, said Heraclitus; for other waters are forever flowing on.

Concerning the language of Na, this was simply and literally true.

That made it bad enough. But even worse was the fact that an observer like Jackson could never hope to fix or isolate even one term out of the dynamic shifting network of terms that composed the Na language. For the observer's action would be gross enough by itself to disrupt and alter the system, causing it to change unpredictably. And so, if the term were isolated, its relationship to the other terms in the system would necessarily be destroyed, and the term itself, by definition, would be false.

By the fact of its change, the language was rendered impervious to condification and control. Through indeterminacy, the Na tongue resisted all attempts to conquer it. And Jackson had gone from Heraclitus to Heisenberg without touching second base. He was dazed and dazzled, and he looked upon the officials with something approaching awe.

"You've done it, boys," he told them. "You've beaten the system. Old Earth could swallow you and never notice the difference; you couldn't do a damned thing about it. But the folks back home like their legalism, and our law says that we must be in a state of communication as a prior condition to any transaction."

"*Mun?*" Erum asked politely.

"So I guess that means I leave you folks alone," Jackson said. "At least, I do as long as they keep that law on the books. But what the hell, a reprieve is the best anyone can ask for. Eh?"

"*Mun mun*," the mayor said hesitantly.

"I'll be getting along now," Jackson said. "Fair's fair ... But if I ever find out that you Naians were putting one over on me—"

He left the sentence unfinished. Without another word, Jackson turned and went back to his ship.

In half an hour he was spaceworthy, and fifteen minutes after that he was under way.

6

In Erum's office, the officials watched while Jackson's spaceship glowed like a comet in the dark afternoon sky. It dwindled to a brilliant needlepoint, and then vanished into the vastness of space.

The officials were silent for a moment; then they turned and looked at each other. Suddenly, spontaneously, they burst into laughter. Harder and harder they laughed, clutching their sides while tears rolled down their cheeks.

The mayor was the first to check the hysteria. Getting a grip on himself he said, "*Mun, mun, mun-mun*."

This thought instantly sobered the others. Their mirth died away. Uneasily they contemplated the distant unfriendly sky, and they thought back over their recent adventures.

At last young Erum asked, "*Mun-mun? Mun-mun?*"

Several of the officials smiled at the naiveté of the question. And yet, none could answer that simple yet crucial demand. Why indeed? Did anyone dare hazard even a guess?

It was a perplexity leaving in doubt not only the future but the past as well. And, if a real answer were unthinkable, then no answer at all was surely insupportable.

The silence grew, and Erum's young mouth twisted downwards in premature cynicism. He said quite harshly, "*Mun! Mun-mun! Mun?*"

His shocking words were no more than the hasty cruelty of the young; but such a statement could not go unchallenged. And the venerable first alderman stepped forward to essay a reply.

"*Mun mun, mun-mun*," the old man said, with disarming simplicity. "*Mun mun mun-mun? Mun mun-mun-mun. Mun mun mun; mun mun mun; mun mun. Mun, mun mun mun—mun mun mun. Mun-mun? Mun mun mun mun!*"

This straightforward declaration of faith pierced Erum to the core of his being. Tears sprang unanticipated to his eyes. All postures forgotten, he turned to the sky, clenched his fist and shouted, "*Mun! Mun! Mun-mun!*"

Smiling serenely, the old alderman murmured, "*Mun-mun-mun; mun, mun-mun*."

This was, ironically enough, the marvelous and frightening truth of the situation. Perhaps it was just as well that the others did not hear.

CORDLE TO ONION TO CARROT

SURELY, you remember that bully who kicked sand on the ninety-seven-pound-weakling? Well, that puny man's problem has never been solved, despite Charles Atlas's claims to the contrary. A genuine bully *likes* to kick sand on people; for him, simply, there is gut-deep satisfaction in a put-down. It wouldn't matter if you weighed 240 pounds—all of it rock-hard muscle and steely sinew—and were as wise as Solomon or as witty as Voltaire; you'd still end up with the sand of an insult in your eyes, and probably you wouldn't do anything about it.

That was how Howard Cordle viewed the situation. He was a pleasant man who was forever being pushed around by Fuller Brush men, fund solicitors, headwaiters, and other imposing figures of authority. Cordle hated it. He suffered in silence the countless numbers of manic-aggressives who shoved their way to the heads of lines, took taxis he had hailed first, and sneeringly steered away girls to whom he was talking at parties.

What made it worse was that these people seemed to welcome provocation, to go looking for it, all for the sake of causing discomfort to others.

Cordle couldn't understand why this should be, until one midsummer's day, when he was driving through the northern regions of Spain while stoned out of his mind, the god Thoth-Hermes granted him original enlightenment by murmuring. "Uh, look, I groove with the problem, baby, but dig, we gotta put carrots in or it ain't no stew."

"*Carrots*?" said Cordle, struggling for illumination.

"I'm talking about those types who get you uptight," Thoth-Hermes explained. "They *gotta* act that way, baby, on account of they're carrots, and that's how carrots are."

"If they are carrots," Cordle said, feeling his way, "then I—"

"You, of course, are a little pearly-white onion."

"Yes! My God, yes!" Cordle cried, dazzled by the blinding light of satori.

"And, naturally, you and all the other pearly-white onions think that carrots are just bad news, merely some kind of misshapen orangey onion; whereas the carrots look at you and rap about *freaky round white carrots, wow!* I mean, you're just too much for each other, whereas, in actuality—"

"Yes, go on!" cried Cordle.

"In actuality," Thoth-Hermes declared, "*everything's got a place in The Stew*!"

"Of course! I see, I see, I see!"

"And *that* means that everybody who exists is necessary, and you *must* have long hateful orange carrots if you're also going to have nice pleasant decent white onions, or vice versa, because without all of the ingredients, it isn't a Stew, which is to say, life. It becomes, uh, let me see...."

"A soup!" cried ecstatic Cordle.

"You're coming in five by five," chanted Thoth-Hermes. "Lay down the word, deacon, and let the people know the divine formula...."

"A *soup!*" said Cordle. "Yes, I see it now—creamy, pure-white onion soup is our dream of heaven, whereas fiery orange carrot broth is our notion of hell. It fits, it all fits together!"

"Om manipadme hum," intoned Thoth-Hermes.

"But where do the green peas go? What about the *meat*, for God's sake?"

"Don't pick at the metaphor," Thoth-Hermes advised him, "it leaves a nasty scab. Stick with the carrots and onions. And, here, let me offer you a drink—a house specialty."

"But the spices, where do you put the *spices?"* Cordle demanded, taking a long swig of burgundy-colored liquid from a rusted canteen.

"Baby, you're asking questions that can be revealed only to a thirteenth-degree Mason with piles, wearing sandals. Sorry about that. Just remember that everything goes into The Stew."

"Into The Stew," Cordle repeated, smacking his lips.

"And, especially, stick with the carrots and onions; you were really grooving there."

"Carrots and onions," Cordle repeated.

"That's your trip," Thoth-Hermes said. "Hey, we've gotten to Corunna; you can let me out anywhere around here."

Cordle pulled his rented car off the road. Thoth-Hermes took his knapsack from the back seat and got out.

"Thanks for the lift, baby."

"My pleasure. Thank *you* for the wine. What kind did you say it was?"

"*Vino de casa* mixed with a mere smidgen of old Dr. Hammerfinger's essence of instant powdered Power-Pack brand acid. Brewed by gnurrs in the secret laboratories of UCLA in preparation for the big all-Europe turn-on."

"Whatever it was, it surely *was,"* Cordle said deeply. "Pure elixir to me. You could sell neckties to antelopes with that stuff; you could change the world from an oblate spheroid into a truncated trapezoid.... What did I say?"

"Never mind, it's all part of your trip. Maybe you better lie down for a while, huh?"

"Where gods command, mere mortals must obey," Cordle said iambically. He lay down on the front seat of the car. Thoth-Hermes bent over him, his beard burnished gold, his head wreathed in plane trees.

"You OK?"

"Never better in my life."

"Want me to stand by?"

"Unnecessary. You have helped me beyond potentiality."

"Glad to hear it, baby, you're making a fine sound. You really are OK? Well, then, ta."

Thoth-Hermes marched off into the sunset. Cordle closed his eyes and solved various problems that had perplexed the greatest philosophers of all ages. He was mildly surprised at how simple complexity was.

At last he went to sleep. He awoke some six hours later. He had forgotten most of his brilliant insights, the lucid solutions. It was inconceivable: How can one misplace the keys of the universe? But he had, and there seemed no hope of reclaiming them. Paradise was lost for good.

He did remember about the onions and the carrots, though, and he remembered The Stew. It was not the sort of insight he might have chosen if he'd had any choice; but this was what had come to him, and he did not reject it. Cordle knew, perhaps instinctively, that in the insight game, you take whatever you can get.

The next day, he reached Santander in a driving rain. He decided to write amusing letters to all of his friends, perhaps even try his hand at a travel sketch. That required a typewriter. The *conserje* at his hotel directed him to a store that rented typewriters. He went there and found a clerk who spoke perfect English.

"Do you rent typewriters by the day?" Cordle asked.

"Why not?" the clerk replied. He had oily black hair and a thin aristocratic nose.

"How much for that one?" Cordle asked, indicating a thirty-year-old Erika portable.

"Seventy pesetas a day, which is to say, one dollar. Usually."

"Isn't this usually?"

"Certainly not, since you are a foreigner in transit. For you, one hundred and eighty pesetas a day."

"All right," Cordle said, reaching for his wallet. "I'd like to have it for two days."

"I shall also require your passport and a deposit of fifty dollars."

Cordle attempted a mild joke. "Hey, I just want to type on it, not marry it."

The clerk shrugged.

"Look, the *conserje* has my passport at the hotel. How about taking my driver's license instead?"

"Certainly not. I must hold your passport, in case you decide to default."

"But why do you need my passport *and* the deposit?" Cordle asked, feeling bullied and ill at ease. "I mean, look, the machine's not worth twenty dollars."

"You are an expert, perhaps, in the Spanish market value of used German typewriters?"

"No, but—"

"Then permit me, sir, to conduct my business as I see fit. I will also need to know the use to which you plan to put the machine."

"The *use?"*

"Of course, the use."

It was one of these preposterous foreign situations that can happen to anyone. The clerk's request was incomprehensible, and his manner was insulting. Cordle was about to give a curt little nod, turn on his heel, and walk out.

Then he remembered about the onions and carrots. He saw The Stew. And suddenly, it occurred to Cordle that he could be whatever vegetable he wanted to be.

He turned to the clerk. He smiled winningly. He said, "You wish to know the use I will make of the typewriter?"

"Exactly."

"Well," Cordle said, "quite frankly, I had planned to stuff it up my nose."

The clerk gaped at him.

"It's quite a successful method of smuggling," Cordle went on. "I was also planning to give you a stolen passport and counterfeit pesetas. Once I got into Italy, I would have sold the typewriter for ten thousand dollars. Milan is undergoing a typewriter famine, you know; they're desperate, they'll buy anything."

"Sir," the clerk said, "you choose to be disagreeable."

"Nasty is the word you were looking for. I've changed my mind about the typewriter. But let me compliment you on your command of English."

"I have studied assiduously," the clerk admitted, with a hint of pride.

"That is evident. And, despite a certain weakness in the Rs, you succeed in sounding like a Venetian gondolier with a cleft palate. My best wishes to your esteemed family. I leave you now to pick your pimples in peace."

Reviewing the scene later, Cordle decided that he had performed quite well in his maiden appearance as a carrot. True, his closing lines had been a little forced and overintellectualized. But the undertone of viciousness had been convincing.

Most important was the simple resounding fact that he had done it. And now, in the quiet of his

hotel room, instead of churning his guts in a frenzy of self-loathing, he had the tranquilizing knowledge of having put someone else in that position.

He had done it! Just like that, he had transformed himself from onion into carrot!

But was his position ethically defensible? Presumably, the clerk could not help being detestable; he was a product of his own genetic and social environment, a victim of his conditioning; he was naturally rather than intentionally hateful—

Cordle stopped himself. He saw that he was engaged in typical onionish thinking, which was an inability to conceive of carrots except as an aberration from oniondom.

But now he knew that both onions *and* carrots had to exist; otherwise, there would be no Stew.

And he also knew that a man was free and could choose whatever vegetable he wanted to be. He could even live as an amusing little green pea, or a gruff, forceful clove of garlic (though perhaps that was scratching at the metaphor). In any event, a man could take his pick between carrothood and oniondom.

There is much to think about here, Cordle thought. But he never got around to thinking about it. Instead, he went sightseeing, despite the rain, and then continued his travels.

The next incident occurred in Nice, in a cozy little restaurant on the Avenue des Diables Bleus, with red-checkered tablecloths and incomprehensible menus written in longhand with purple ink. There were four waiters, one of whom looked like Jean-Paul Belmondo, down to the cigarette drooping from his long lower lip. The others looked like run-of-the-mill muggers. There were several Scandinavian customers quietly eating a *cassoulet*, one old Frenchman in a beret, and three homely English girls.

Belmondo sauntered over. Cordle, who spoke a clear though idiomatic French, asked for the ten-franc menu he had seen hanging in the window.

The waiter gave him the sort of look one reserves for pretentious beggars. "Ah, that is all finished for today," he said, and handed Cordle a thirty-franc menu.

In his previous incarnation, Cordle would have bit down on the bullet and ordered. Or possibly he would have risen, trembling with outrage, and left the restaurant, blundering into a chair on the way.

But now—

"Perhaps you did not understand me," Cordle said. "It is a matter of French law that you must serve from all of the fixed-price menus that you show in the window."

"*M'sieu* is a lawyer?" the waiter inquired, his hands perched insolently on his hips.

"No. *M'sieu* is a troublemaker," Cordle said, giving what he considered to be fair warning.

"Then *m'sieu* must make what trouble he desires," the waiter said. His eyes were slits.

"OK," Cordle said. And just then, fortuitously, an elderly couple came into the restaurant. The man wore a double-breasted slate-blue suit with a half-inch white pinstripe. The woman wore a flowered organdy dress. Cordle called to them, "Excuse me, are you folks English?"

A bit startled, the man inclined his head in the barest intimation of a nod.

"Then I would advise you not to eat here. I am a health inspector for UNESCO. The chef apparently has not washed his hands since D-day. We haven't made a definitive test for typhoid yet, but we have our suspicions. As soon as my assistant arrives with the litmus paper ..."

A deathly hush had fallen over the restaurant.

"I suppose a boiled egg would be safe enough," Cordle said.

The elderly man probably didn't believe him. But it didn't matter, Cordle was obviously trouble.

"Come, Mildred," he said, and they hurried out.

"There goes sixty francs plus five percent tip," Cordle said, coolly.

"Leave here at once!" the waiter snarled.

"I like it here," Cordle said, folding his arms. "I like the *ambiance*, the sense of intimacy—"

"You are not permitted to stay without eating."

"I shall eat. From the ten-franc menu."

The waiters looked at one another, nodded in unison, and began to advance in a threatening phalanx. Cordle called to the other diners, "I ask you all to bear witness! These men are going to attack me, four against one, contrary to French law and universal human ethics, simply because I want to order from the ten-franc menu, which they have falsely advertised."

It was a long speech, but this was clearly the time for grandiloquence. Cordle repeated it in English.

The English girls gasped. The old Frenchman went on eating his soup. The Scandinavians nodded grimly and began to take off their jackets.

The waiters held another conference. The one who looked like Belmondo said, "*M'sieu*, you are forcing us to call the police."

"That will save me the trouble," Cordle said, "of calling them myself."

"Surely *m'sieu* does not want to spend his holiday in court?"

"That is how *m'sieu* spends most of his holidays," Cordle said.

The waiters conferred again. Then Belmondo stalked over with the thirty-franc menu. "The cost of the *prix fixe* will be ten francs, since evidently that is all *m'sieu* can afford."

Cordle let that pass. "Bring me onion soup, green salad, and the *boeuf bourguignon*."

The waiter went to put in the order. While he was waiting, Cordle sang "Waltzing Matilda" in a moderately loud voice. He suspected it might speed up the service. He got his food by the time he reached "You'll never catch me alive, said he" for the second time. Cordle pulled the tureen of stew toward him and lifted a spoon.

It was a breathless moment. Not one diner had left the restaurant. And Cordle was prepared. He leaned forward, soup spoon in shoveling position, and sniffed delicately. A hush fell over the room.

"It lacks a certain something," Cordle said aloud. Frowning, he poured the onion soup into the *boeuf bourguignon*. He sniffed, shook his head and added a half loaf of bread, in slices. He sniffed again and added the salad and the contents of a saltcellar.

Cordle pursed his lips. "No," he said, "it simply will not do."

He overturned the entire contents of the tureen onto the table. It was an act comparable, perhaps, to throwing gentian violet on the *Mona Lisa*. All of France and most of western Switzerland went into a state of shock.

Unhurriedly, but keeping the frozen waiters under surveillance, Cordle rose and dropped ten francs into the mess. He walked to the door, turned, and said, "My compliments to the chef, who might better be employed as a cement mixer. And this, *mon vieux*, is for you."

He threw his crumpled linen napkin onto the floor.

As the matador, after a fine series of passes, turns his back contemptuously on the bull and strolls away, so went Cordle. For some unknown reason, the waiters did not rush out after him, shoot him dead, and hang his corpse from the nearest lamppost. So Cordle walked for ten or fifteen blocks, taking rights and lefts at random. He came to the Promenade des Anglais and sat down on a bench. He was trembling and his shirt was drenched with perspiration.

"But I did it," he said. "I did it! I! I was unspeakably vile and I got away with it!"

Now he really knew why carrots acted that way. Dear God in heaven, what joy, what delectable bliss!

Cordle then reverted to his mild-mannered self, smoothly and without regrets. He stayed that way until his second day in Rome.

He was in his rented car. He and seven other drivers were lined up at a traffic light on the Corso Vittorio Emanuele II. There were perhaps twenty cars behind them. All of the drivers were revving their engines, hunched over their steering wheels with slitted eyes, dreaming of Le Mans. All except Cordle, who was drinking in the cyclopean architecture of downtown Rome.

The checkered flag came down! The drivers floored their accelerators, trying to spin the wheels of their under-powered Fiats, wearing out their clutches and their nerves, but doing so with éclat and *brio*. All except Cordle, who seemed to be the only man in Rome who didn't have to win a race or keep an appointment.

Without undue haste or particular delay, Cordle depressed the clutch and engaged the gear. Already he had lost nearly two seconds—unthinkable at Monza or Monte Carlo.

The driver behind him blew his horn frantically.

Cordle smiled to himself, a secret, ugly expression. He put the gearshift into neutral, engaged the hand brake, and stepped out of his car. He ambled over to the horn blower, who had turned pasty white and was fumbling under his seat, hoping to find a tire iron.

"Yes?" said Cordle, in French, "is something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing," the driver replied in French—his first mistake. "I merely wanted you to go, to move."

"But I was just doing that," Cordle pointed out.

"Well, then! It is all right!"

"No, it is not all right," Cordle told him. "I think I deserve a better explanation of why you blew your horn at me."

The horn blower—a Milanese businessman on holiday with his wife and four children—rashly replied, "My dear sir, you were slow, you were delaying us all."

"*Slow*?" said Cordle. "You blew your horn two seconds after the light changed. Do you call two seconds slow?"

"It was much longer than that," the man riposted feebly.

Traffic was now backed up as far south as Naples. A crowd of ten thousand had gathered. *Carabinieri* units in Viterbo and Genoa had been called into a state of alert.

"That is untrue," Cordle said. "I have witnesses." He gestured at the crowd, which gestured back. "I shall call my witnesses before the courts. You must know that you broke the law by blowing your horn within the city limits of Rome in what was clearly not an emergency."

The Milanese businessman looked at the crowd, now swollen to perhaps fifty thousand. Dear God, he thought, if only the Goths would descend again and exterminate these leering Romans! If only the ground would open up and swallow this insane Frenchman! If only he, Giancarlo Morelli, had a dull spoon with which to open up the veins of his wrist!

Jets from the Sixth Fleet thundered overhead, hoping to avert the long-expected *coup d'état*.

The Milanese businessman's own wife was shouting abuse at him: Tonight he would cut out her faithless heart and mail it back to her mother.

What was there to do? In Milan, he would have had this Frenchman's head on a platter. But this was Rome, a southern city, an unpredictable and dangerous place. And legalistically, he was possibly

in the wrong, which left him at a further disadvantage in the argument.

"Very well," he said. "The blowing of the horn was perhaps truly unnecessary, despite the provocation."

"I insist on a genuine apology," insisted Cordle.

There was a thundering sound to the east: Thousands of Soviet tanks were moving into battle formation across the plains of Hungary, ready to resist the long-expected NATO thrust into Transylvania. The water supply was cut off in Foggia, Brindisi, Bari. The Swiss closed their frontiers and stood ready to dynamite the passes.

"All right, I apologize!" the Milanese businessman screamed. "I am sorry I provoked you and even sorrier that I was born! Again, I apologize! Now will you go away and let me have a heart attack in peace?"

"I accept your apology," Cordle said. "No hard feelings, eh?" He strolled back to his car, humming "Blow the Man Down," and drove away as millions cheered.

War was once again averted by a hairbreadth.

Cordle drove to the Arch of Titus, parked his car, and—to the sound of a thousand trumpets—passed through it. He deserved this triumph as well as any Caesar.

God, he gloated, I was *loathsome!*

In England, Cordle stepped on a young lady's toe just inside the Traitors' Gate of the Tower of London. This should have served as an intimation of something. The young lady was named Mavis. She came from Short Hills, New Jersey, and she had long straight dark hair. She was slender, pretty, intelligent, energetic, and she had a sense of humor. She had minor faults, as well, but they play no part in this story. She let Cordle buy her a cup of coffee. They were together constantly for the rest of the week.

"I think I am infatuated," Cordle said to himself on the seventh day. He realized at once that he had made a slight understatement. He was violently and hopelessly in love.

But what did Mavis feel? She seemed not unfond of him. It was even possible that she might, conceivably, reciprocate.

At that moment, Cordle had a flash of prescience. He realized that one week ago, he had stepped on the toe of his future wife and mother of his two children, both of whom would be born and brought up in a split-level house with inflatable furniture in Summit, New Jersey, or possibly Millburn.

This may sound unattractive and provincial when stated baldly; but it was desirable to Cordle, who had no pretensions to cosmopolitanism. After all, not all of us can live at Cap Ferrat. Strangely enough, not all of us even want to.

That day, Cordle and Mavis went to the Marshall Gordon Residence in Belgravia to see the Byzantine miniatures. Mavis had a passion for Byzantine miniatures that seemed harmless enough at the time. The collection was private, but Mavis had secured invitations through a local Avis manager, who was trying very hard, indeed.

They came to the Gordon Residence, an awesome Regency building in Huddlestone Mews. They rang. A butler in full evening dress answered the door. They showed the invitations. The butler's glance and lifted eyebrow showed that they were carrying second-class invitations of the sort given to importunate art poseurs on seventeen-day all-expense economy flights, rather than the engraved first-class invitations given to Picasso, Jackie Onassis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Norman Mailer, Charles Goren, and other movers and shakers of the world.

The butler said, "Oh, yes...." Two words that spoke black volumes. His face twitched, he looked

like a man who has received an unexpected visit from Tamerlane and a regiment of his Golden Horde.

"The miniatures," Cordle reminded him.

"Yes, of course.... But I am afraid, sir, that no one is allowed into the Gordon Residence without a coat and necktie."

It was an oppressive August day. Cordle was wearing a sport shirt. He said, "Did I hear you correctly? Coat and necktie?"

The butler said, "That is the rule, sir."

Mavis asked, "Couldn't you make an exception this once?"

The butler shook his head. "We really must stick by the rules, miss. Otherwise ..." He left the fear of vulgarity unsaid, but it hung in the air like a chrome-plated fart.

"Of course," Cordle said, pleasantly. "Otherwise. So it's a coat and tie, is it? I think we can arrange that."

Mavis put a hand on his arm and said, "Howard, let's go. We can come back some other time."

"Nonsense, my dear. If I may borrow your coat...."

He lifted the white raincoat from her shoulders and put it on, ripping a seam. "There we go, mate!" he said briskly to the butler. "That should do it, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"I think *not*," the butler said, in a voice bleak enough to wither artichokes. "In any event, there is the matter of the necktie."

Cordle had been waiting for that. He whipped out his sweaty handkerchief and knotted it around his neck.

"Suiting you?" he leered, in an imitation of Peter Lorre as Mr. Moto, which only he appreciated.

"*Howard! Let's go!"*

Cordle waited, smiling steadily at the butler, who was sweating for the first time in living memory.

"I'm afraid, sir, that that is not—"

"Not what?"

"Not precisely what was meant by coat and tie."

"Are you trying to tell me," Cordle said in a loud, unpleasant voice, "that you are an arbiter of men's clothing as well as a door opener?"

"Of course not! But this impromptu attire—"

"What has 'impromptu' got to do with it? Are people supposed to prepare three days in advance just to pass your inspection?"

"You are wearing a woman's waterproof and a soiled handkerchief," the butler stated stiffly. "I think there is no more to say."

He began to close the door. Cordle said, "You do that, sweetheart, and I'll have you up for slander and defamation of character. Those are serious charges over here, buddy, and I've got witnesses."

Aside from Mavis, Cordle had collected a small, diffident, but interested crowd.

"This is becoming entirely too ridiculous," the butler said, temporizing, the door half closed.

"You'll find a stretch at Wormwood Scrubs even more ridiculous," Cordle told him. "I intend to persecute—I mean prosecute."

"*Howard!"* cried Mavis.

He shook off her hand and fixed the butler with a piercing glance. He said, "I am Mexican, though perhaps my excellent grasp of the English has deceived you. In my country, a man would cut his own throat before letting such an insult pass unavenged. A woman's coat, you say? *Hombre*, when I wear a

coat, it becomes a *man's* coat. Or do you imply that I am a *maricón*, a—how do you say it?—homosexual?"

The crowd—becoming less modest—growled approval. Nobody except a lord loves a butler.

"I meant no such implication," the butler said weakly.

"Then is it a man's coat?"

"Just as you wish, sir."

"Unsatisfactory! The innuendo still exists. I go now to find an officer of the law."

"Wait, let's not be hasty," the butler said. His face was bloodless and his hands were shaking. "Your coat is a man's coat, sir."

"And what about my necktie?"

The butler made a final attempt at stopping Zapata and his blood-crazed peons.

"Well, sir, a handkerchief is demonstrably—"

"What I wear around my neck," Cordle said coldly, "becomes what it is intended to be. If I wore a piece of figured silk around my throat, would you call it ladies' underwear? Linen is a suitable material for a tie, *verdad?* Function defines terminology, don't you agree? If I ride to work on a cow, no one says that I am mounted on a steak. Or do you detect a flaw in my argument?"

"I'm afraid that I don't fully understand it...."

"Then how can you presume to stand in judgment over it?"

The crowd, which had been growing restless, now murmured approval.

"Sir," cried the wretched butler, "I beg of you ..."

"*Otherwise,"* Cordle said with satisfaction, "I have a coat, a necktie, and an invitation. Perhaps you would be good enough to show us the Byzantine miniatures?"

The butler opened wide the door to Pancho Villa and his tattered hordes. The last bastion of civilization had been captured in less than an hour. Wolves howled along the banks of the Thames, Morelos's barefoot army stabled its horses in the British Museum, and Europe's long night had begun.

Cordle and Mavis viewed the collection in silence. They didn't exchange a word until they were alone and strolling through Regent's Park.

"Look, Mavis," Cordle began.

"No, you look," she said. "You were horrible! You were unbelievable! You were—I can't find a word rotten enough for what you were! I never dreamed that you were one of those sadistic bastards who get their kicks out of humiliating people!"

"But, Mavis, you heard what he said to me, you heard the way—"

"He was a stupid, bigoted old man," Mavis said. "I thought you were not."

"But he said—"

"It doesn't matter. The fact is, you were enjoying yourself!"

"Well, yes, maybe you're right," Cordle said. "Look, I can explain."

"Not to me, you can't. Ever. Please stay away from me, Howard. Permanently. I mean that."

The future mother of his two children began to walk away, out of his life. Cordle hurried after her.

"Mavis!"

"I'll call a cop, Howard, so help me, I will! Just leave me alone!"

"Mavis, I love you!"

She must have heard him, but she kept on walking. She was a sweet and beautiful girl and definitely, unchangeably, an onion.

Cordle was never able to explain to Mavis about The Stew and about the necessity for experiencing

behavior before condemning it. Moments of mystical illumination are seldom explicable. He *was* able to make her believe that he had undergone a brief psychotic episode, unique and unprecedented and—with her—never to be repeated.

They are married now, have one girl and one boy, live in a split-level house in Plainfield, New Jersey, and are quite content. Cordle is visibly pushed around by Fuller Brush men, fund solicitors, headwaiters, and other imposing figures of authority. But there is a difference.

Cordle makes a point of taking regularly scheduled, solitary vacations. Last year, he made a small name for himself in Honolulu. This year, he is going to Buenos Aires.

THE PEOPLE TRAP

1

IT WAS Land Race Day—a time of vaunting hope and unrelieved tragedy, a day which epitomized the unhappy twenty-first century. Steve Baxter had tried to reach the starting line early, like the other contestants, but had miscalculated the amount of time he would require. Now he was in trouble. His Participant's Badge had got him through the outer exocrowd without incident. But neither badge nor brawn could be relied upon to carry a man through the obdurate inner core of humanity which made up the endocrowd.

Baxter estimated this inner mass at 8.7 density—not far from the pandemic level. A flash point might occur at any moment, despite the fact that the authorities had just aerosoled the endocrowd with tranquillizers. Given enough time, a man might circle around them; but Baxter had only six minutes before the race began.

Despite the risk, he pushed his way directly into their ranks. On his face he wore a fixed smile—absolutely essential when dealing with a high-density human configuration. He could see the starting line now, a raised dais in Jersey City's Glebe Park. The other contestants were already there. Another twenty yards, Steve thought; if only the brutes don't stampede!

But deep within the corecrowd he still had to penetrate the final nuclear mob. This was composed of bulky, slack-jawed men with unfocused eyes—agglutinating hysterophiliacs, in the jargon of the pandemiologists. Jammed together sardine fashion, reacting as a single organism, these men were incapable of anything but blind resistance and irrational fury towards anything that tried to penetrate their ranks.

Steve hesitated for a moment. The nuclear mob, more dangerous than the fabled water buffaloes of antiquity, glared at him, their nostrils flared, their heavy feet shuffling ominously.

Without allowing himself time to think, Baxter plunged into their midst. He felt blows on his back and shoulders and heard the terrifying *urrr* of a maddened endomob. Shapeless bodies jammed against him, suffocating him, relentlessly pressing closer and closer.

Then, providentially, the authorities turned on the Muzak. This ancient and mysterious music, which for over a century had pacified the most intractable berserkers, did not fail now. The endomob was decibeled into a temporary immobility, and Steve Baxter clawed his way through to the starting line.

The chief judge had already begun to read the Prospectus. Every contestant and most of the spectators knew this document by heart. Nevertheless, by law the terms had to be stated.

"Gentlemen," the judge read, "you are here assembled to take part in a race for the acquisition of public-domain lands. You fifty fortunate men have been chosen by public lottery from fifty million registrants in the South Westchester region. The race will proceed from this point to the registration line at the Land Office in Times Square, New York—an adjusted approximate mean distance of 5.7 statute miles. You contestants are permitted to take any route; to travel on the surface, above, or below ground. The only requirement is that you finish in person, substitutes not being permitted. The first ten finalists—"

The crowd became deathly still.

"—will receive one acre of unencumbered land complete with house and farming implements.

And each finalist will also be granted free Government transportation to his freehold, for himself and for his immediate family. And this aforesaid acre shall be his to have and to hold, free and clear, perpetually unalienable, as long as the sun shines and water flows, for him and his heirs, even unto the third generation!"

The crowd sighed when they heard this. Not a man among them had ever seen an unencumbered acre, much less dreamed of possessing one. An acre of land entirely for yourself and your family, an acre which you didn't have to share with anyone—well, it was simply beyond the wildest fantasy.

"Be it further noted," the judge went on, "the Government accepts no responsibility for deaths incurred during this contest. I am obliged to point out that the unweighted average mortality rate for Land Races is approximately 68.9 percent. Any contestant who so wishes may withdraw now without prejudice."

The judge waited, and for a moment Steve Baxter considered dropping the whole suicidal idea. Surely he and Adele and the kids and Aunt Flo and Uncle George could continue to get by somehow in their cozy one-room apartment in Larchmont's Fred Allen Memorial Median Income Housing Cluster. After all, he was no man of action, no muscled bravo or hairy-fisted brawler. He was a systems-deformation consultant, and a good one. And he was also a mild-mannered ectomorph with stringy muscles and a distinct shortness of breath. Why in God's name should he thrust himself into the perils of darkest New York, most notorious of the Jungle Cities?

"Better give it up, Steve," a voice said, uncannily echoing his thoughts.

Baxter turned and saw Edward Freihoff St. John, his wealthy and obnoxious neighbor from Larchmont. St. John, tall and elegant and whipcord-strong from his days on the paddle-ball courts. St. John, with his smooth, saturnine good looks, whose hooded eyes were too frequently turned towards Adele's blonde loveliness.

"You'll never make it, Stevie baby," St. John said.

"That is possible," Baxter said evenly. "But you, I suppose, will make it?"

St. John winked and laid a forefinger alongside his nose in a knowing gesture. For weeks he had been hinting about the special information he had purchased from a venal Land Race comptroller. This information would vastly improve his chances of traversing Manhattan Borough—the densest and most dangerous urban concentration in the world.

"Stay out of it, Stevie baby," St. John said in his peculiar rasping voice. "Stay out, and I'll make it worth your while. Whaddaya say, sweetie pie?"

Baxter shook his head. He did not consider himself a courageous man; but he would rather die than take a favor from St. John. And in any event, he could not go on as before. Under last month's Codicil to the Extended Families Domicile Act, Steve was now legally obliged to take in three unmarried cousins and a widowed aunt, whose one-room sub-basement apartment in the Lake Placid industrial complex had been wiped out by the new Albany-Montreal Tunnel.

Even with anti-shock injections, ten persons in one room was too much. He simply had to win a piece of land!

"I'm staying," Baxter said quietly.

"OK, sucker," St. John said, a frown marring his hard, sardonic face. "But remember, I warned you."

The chief judge called out," Gentlemen, on your marks!"

The contestants fell silent. They toed the starting line with slitted eyes and compressed mouths.

"Get ready!"

A hundred sets of leg muscles bunched as fifty determined men leaned forward.

"Go!"

And the race was on!

A blare of supersonics temporarily paralyzed the surrounding mob. The contestants squirmed through their immobile ranks and sprinted over and around the long lines of stalled automobiles. Then they fanned out but tended mainly to the east, towards the Hudson River and the evil-visaged city that lay on its far shore, half concealed in its sooty cloak of unburned hydrocarbons.

Only Steve Baxter had not turned to the east.

Alone among the contestants, he had swung north, towards the George Washington Bridge and Bear Mountain City. His mouth was tight, and he moved like a man in a dream.

In distant Larchmont, Adele Baxter was watching the race on television. Involuntarily, she gasped. Her eight-year-old son Tommy cried, "Mom, Mom, he's going north to the bridge! But it's closed this month. He can't get through that way!"

"Don't worry, darling," Adele said. "Your father knows what he's doing."

She spoke with an assurance she did not feel. And, as the figure of her husband was lost in the crowds, she settled back to wait—and to pray. Did Steve know what he was doing? Or had he panicked under pressure?

2

The seeds of the problem had been sown in the twentieth century; but the terrible harvest was reaped a hundred years later. After uncounted millennia of slow increase, the population of the world suddenly exploded, doubled, and doubled again. With disease checked and food supplies assured, death rates continued to fall as birthrates rose: Caught in a nightmare geometric progression, the ranks of humanity swelled like runaway cancers.

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse, those ancient policemen, could no longer be relied upon to maintain order. Pestilence and famine had been outlawed, and war was too luxurious for this subsistence age. Only death remained—much diminished, a mere shadow of his former self.

Science, with splendid irrationality, continued to work insensately towards the goal of more life for more people.

And *people* marched on, still increasing, crowding the earth with their numbers, stifling the air and poisoning the water, eating their processed algae between slices of fish-meal bread, dimly awaiting a catastrophe to thin out their unwieldy ranks, and waiting in vain.

The quantitative increase in numbers produced qualitative changes in human experience. In a more innocent age, adventure and danger had been properties of the waste places—the high mountains, bleak deserts, steaming jungles. But by the twenty-first century most of these places were being utilized in the accelerating search for living-space. Adventure and danger were now to be found in the monstrous, ungovernable cities.

In the cities one found the modern equivalent of savage tribes, fearsome beasts, and dread disease. An expedition into New York or Chicago required more resourcefulness and stamina, more ingenuity, than those lighthearted Victorian jaunts to Everest or the source of the Nile.

In this pressure-pot world, land was the most precious of commodities. The Government parceled it out as it became available, by means of regional lotteries culminating in Land Races. These contests were patterned after those held in the 1890s for the opening of the Oklahoma Territory and the Cherokee Strip.

The Land Race was considered equitable and interesting—both sporty and sporting. Millions watched the races, and the tranquillizing effect of vicarious excitement upon the masses was duly noted and approved. This in itself was sufficient justification for the races.

Additionally, the high mortality rate among the contestants had to be considered an asset. It didn't amount to much in absolute numbers; but a stifled world was grateful for even the smallest alleviation.

The race was three hours old. Steve Baxter turned on his little transistor radio and listened to the latest reports. He heard how the first group of contestants had arrived at the Holland Tunnel and had been turned back by armored policemen. Others, more devious, had taken the long southern trek to Staten Island and were presently approaching the approaches of the Verrazzano Bridge. Freihoff St. John, all by himself, flashing a deputy mayor's badge, had been allowed past the Lincoln Tunnel barricades.

But now it was time for Steve Baxter's gamble. Grim-faced, with quiet courage, he entered the infamous Free Port of Hoboken.

3

It was dusk on the Hoboken foreshore. Before him, in a sweeping crescent, lay the trim, swift ships of the Hoboken smuggling fleet, each with its gleaming Coast Guard medallion. Some already had cargo lashed to their decks—cases of cigarettes from North Carolina, liquor from Kentucky, oranges from Florida, goof balls from California, guns from Texas. Each case bore the official marking, CONTRABAND—TAX PAID. For in this unhappy day and age, the hard-pressed Government was forced to tax even illegal enterprises, and thus to give them a quasi-legal status.

Choosing his moment carefully, Baxter stepped aboard a rakish marijuana runner and crouched down among the aromatic bales. The craft was ready for imminent departure; if he could only conceal himself during the short passage across the river ...

"Har! What in the hell have we here?"

A drunken second engineer, coming up unexpectedly from the fo'c'sle, had caught Baxter unawares. Responding to his shout, the rest of the crew swarmed onto the deck. They were a hard-bitten, swaggering lot, feared for their casually murderous ways. These were the same breed of Godless men who had sacked Weehawken some years ago, had put Fort Lee to the torch, had raided and pillaged all the way to the gates of Englewood. Steve Baxter knew that he could expect no mercy from them.

Nevertheless, with admirable coolness, he said," Gentlemen, I am in need of transportation across the Hudson, if you please."

The ship's captain, a colossal mestizo with a scarred face and bulging muscles, leaned back and bellowed with laughter.

"Ye seek passage of *uns*?" he declared in the broad Hobokenese patois. "Think 'ee we be the Christopher Street ferry, hai?"

"Not at all, sir. But I had hoped—"

"To the boneyard wit' yer hopes!"

The crew roared at the witticism.

"I am willing to pay for my passage," Steve said with quiet dignity.

"*Pay* is it?" roared the captain. "Aye, we sometimes sell passages—nonstop to midstream, and thence straight down!"

The crew redoubled its laughter.

"If it is to be, then let it so be," Steve Baxter said. "I request only that you permit me to drop a postcard to my wife and children."

"Woife and tuckins?" the captain inquired. "Why didn't yer mention! Had that lot myself aforetime ago, until waunders did do marvain to the lot."

"I am sorry to hear that," Steve said with evident sincerity.

"Aye." The captain's iron visage softened. "I do remember how, in oftens colaim, the leetle blainsprites did leap giner on the saern; yes, and it was roses all till diggerdog."

"You must have been very happy," Steve said. He was following the man's statements with difficulty.

"I maun do," the captain said heavily.

A bowlegged little forebow deckman thrust himself forward. "Hi, Captain, let's do for him and get underway before the pot rots on the spot."

"Who you giving orders at, ye mangy, scut-faced hogifier!" the captain raved. "By Big Jesus, we'll let the pot rot till I say not! And as for doing him—nay, I'll do one deed for me blainsprites, shiver me if I won't!" Turning to Baxter, he said," We'll carry ye, laddie, and for naught ought loot."

Thus, fortuitously, Steve Baxter had touched upon a bittersweet memory in the captain's recollection and had thereby won respite. The marijuana men pushed off, and soon the sleek craft was breasting the sallow gray-green waves of the Hudson.

But Steve Baxter's respite was short-lived. In midstream, just after they entered Federal waters, a powerful search-light flashed out of the evening gloom and an officious voice ordered them to heave to. Evil luck had steered them straight into the path of a destroyer on the Hudson patrol.

"Damn them!" the captain raved. "Tax and kill, that's all they know! But we'll show them our mettle! To the guns, bullies!"

Swiftly the crew peeled the tarpaulins from the fifty-caliber machine guns, and the boat's twin diesels roared defiance. Twisting and dodging, the pot runner raced for the sanctuary of the New York shore. But the destroyer, forereaching, had the legs of her, and machine guns were no match for four-inch cannon. Direct hits splintered the little ship's toe rail, exploded in the great cabin, smashed through the maintop forestays, and chopped down the starboard mizzen halyards.

Surrender or death seemed the only options. But, weatherwise, the captain sniffed the air. "Hang on, hearties!" he screamed. "There's a Wester do be coming!"

Shells rained around them. Then, out of the west, a vast and impenetrable smog bank rolled in, blanketing everything in its inky tentacles. The battered little kif ship slid away from the combat; and the crew, hastily donning respirators, gave thanks to the smoldering trashlands of Secaucus. As the captain remarked, it is an ill wind that blows no good.

Half an hour later they docked at the 79th Street Pier. The captain embraced Steve warmly and wished him good fortune. And Steve Baxter continued on his journey.

The broad Hudson was behind him. Ahead lay thirty-odd downtown blocks and less than a dozen crosstown blocks. According to the latest radio report, he was well ahead of the other contestants, ahead even of Freihoff St. John, who still had not emerged from the labyrinth at the New York end of the Lincoln Tunnel. He seemed to be doing very nicely, all things considered.

But Baxter's optimism was premature. New York was not conquered so easily. Unknown to him,

the most dangerous parts of his journey still lay before him.

4

After a few hours' sleep in the back of an abandoned car, Steve proceeded southwards on West End Avenue. Soon it was dawn—a magical hour in the city, when no more than a few hundred early-risers were to be found at any given intersection. High overhead were the crenellated towers of Manhattan, and above them the clustered television antennae wove a faery tapestry against a dun and ochre sky. Seeing it like that, Baxter could imagine what New York had been like a hundred years ago, in the gracious, easygoing days before the population explosion.

He was abruptly shaken out of his musings. Appearing as if from nowhere, a party of armed men suddenly barred his path. They wore masks, wide-brimmed black hats, and bandoliers of ammunition. Their aspect was both villainous and picturesque.

One of them, evidently the leader, stepped forward. He was a craggy-featured, balding old man with a heavy black moustache and mournful red-rimmed eyes. "Stranger," he said, "let's see yore pass."

"I don't believe I have one," Baxter said.

"Damned right you don't," the old man said. "I'm Pablo Steinmetz, and I issue all the passes around here, and I don't recollect ever seeing you afore in these parts."

"I'm a stranger here," Baxter said. "I'm just passing through."

The black-hatted men grinned and nudged each other. Pablo Steinmetz rubbed his unshaven jaw and said. "Well, sonny, it just so happens that you're trying to pass through a private toll road without permission of the owner, who happens to be me; so I reckon that means you're illegally trespassing."

"But how could anyone have a private toll road in the heart of New York City?" Baxter asked.

"It's mine 'cause I say it's mine," Pablo Steinmetz said, fingering the notches on the stock of his Winchester 78. "That's just the way it is, stranger, so I reckon you'd better pay or play."

Baxter reached for his wallet and found it was missing. Evidently the pot-boat captain, upon parting, had yielded to his baser instincts and picked his pocket.

"I have no money," Baxter said. He laughed uneasily. "Perhaps I should turn back."

Steinmetz shook his head. "Going back's the same as going forward. It's toll road either way. You still gotta pay or play."

"Then I guess I'll have to play," Baxter said. "What do I do?"

"You run," Old Pablo said, "and we take turns shooting at you, aiming only at the upper part of your head. First man to bring you down wins a turkey."

"That is infamous!" Baxter declared.

"It is kinda tough on you," Steinmetz said mildly. "But that's the way the mortar crumbles. Rules is rules, even in an anarchy. So, therefore, if you will be good enough to break into a wild sprint for freedom ..."

The bandits grinned and nudged each other and loosened their guns in their holsters and pushed back their wide-brimmed black hats. Baxter readied himself for the death run—

And at that moment, a voice cried, "Stop!"

A woman had spoken. Baxter turned and saw that a tall, red-headed girl was striding through the bandit ranks. She was dressed in toreador pants, plastic galoshes, and Hawaiian blouse. The exotic clothing served to enhance her bold beauty. There was a paper rose in her hair, and a string of

cultured pearls set off the slender line of her neck. Never had Baxter seen a more flamboyant loveliness.

Pablo Steinmetz frowned and tugged at his moustache. "Flame!" he roared. "What in tarnation are you up to?"

"I've come to stop your little game, Father," the girl said coolly. "I want a chance to talk to this tanglefoot."

"This is man's business," Steinmetz said. "Stranger, git set to run!"

"Stranger, don't move a muscle!" Flame cried, and a deadly little Derringer appeared in her hand.

Father and daughter glared at each other. Old Pablo was the first to break the tableau.

"Damn it all, Flame, you can't do this," he said. "Rules is rules, even for you. This here illegal trespasser can't pay, so he's gotta play."

"That's no problem," Flame announced. Reaching inside her blouse she extracted a shiny silver double eagle. "There!" she said, throwing it at Pablo's feet. "I've done the paying, and just maybe I'll do the playing, too. Come along, stranger."

She took Baxter by the hand and led him away. The bandits watched them go and grinned and nudged each other until Steinmetz scowled at them. Old Pablo shook his head, scratched his ear, blew his nose, and said, "Consarn that girl!"

The words were harsh, but the tone was unmistakably tender.

5

Night came to the city, and the bandits pitched camp on the corner of 69th Street and West End Avenue. The black-hatted men lounged in attitudes of ease before a roaring fire. A juicy brisket of beef was set out on a spit, and packages of flash-frozen green vegetables were thrown into a capacious black cauldron. Old Pablo Steinmetz, easing the imaginary pain in his wooden leg, drank deep from a jerry can of premixed Martinis. In the darkness beyond the campfire you could hear a lonely poodle howling for his mate.

Steve and Flame sat a little apart from the others. The night, silent except for the distant roar of garbage trucks, worked its enchantment upon them both. Their fingers met, touched, and clung.

Flame said at last, "Steve, you—you do like me, don't you?"

"Why, of course I do," Baxter replied, and slipped his arm around her shoulders in a brotherly gesture not incapable of misinterpretation.

"Well, I've been thinking," the bandit girl said. "I've thought ..." She paused, suddenly shy, then went on. "Oh, Steve, why don't you give up this suicidal race? Why don't you stay here with me! I've got land, Steve, real land—a hundred square yards in the New York Central Switchyard! You and I, Steve, we could farm it together!"

Baxter was tempted—what man would not be? He had not been unaware of the feelings which the beautiful bandit girl entertained for him, nor was he entirely unresponsive to them. Flame Steinmetz's haunting beauty and proud spirit, even without the added attraction of land, might easily have won any man's heart. For a heartbeat he wavered, and his arm tightened around the girl's slim shoulders.

But then, fundamental loyalties reasserted themselves. Flame was the essence of romance, the flash of ecstasy about which a man dreams throughout his life. Yet Adele was his childhood sweetheart, his wife, the mother of his children, the patient helpmate of the long years together. For a man of Steve Baxter's character, there could be no other choice.

The imperious girl was unused to refusal. Angry as a scalded puma, she threatened to tear out Baxter's heart with her fingernails and serve it up lightly dusted in flour and toasted over a medium fire. Her great flashing eyes and trembling bosom showed that this was no mere idle imagery.

Despite this, quietly and implacably, Steve Baxter stuck to his convictions. And Flame realized sadly that she would never have loved this man were he not replete with the very high principles which rendered her desires unattainable.

So in the morning, she offered no resistance when the quiet stranger insisted upon leaving. She even silenced her irate father, who swore that Steve was an irresponsible fool who should be restrained for his own good.

"It's no use, Dad—can't you see that?" she asked. "He must lead his own life, even if it means the end of his life."

Pablo Steinmetz desisted, grumbling. And Steve Baxter set out again upon his desperate Odyssey.

6

Downtown he traveled, jostled and crowded to the point of hysteria, blinded by the flash of neon against chrome, deafened by the incessant city noises. He came at last into a region of proliferating signs:

ONE WAY
DO NOT ENTER
KEEP OFF THE MEDIAN
CLOSED SUNDAYS AND HOLIDAYS
CLOSED WEEKDAYS
LEFT LANE *MUST* TURN LEFT!

Winding through this maze of conflicting commands, he stumbled accidentally into that vast stretch of misery known as Central Park. Before him, as far as the eye could see, every square foot of land was occupied by squalid lean-tos, mean teepees, disreputable shacks, and noisome stews. His sudden appearance among the brutalized park inhabitants excited comment, none of it favorable. They got it into their heads that he was a health inspector, come to close down their malarial wells, slaughter their trichinoidal hogs, and vaccinate their scabrous children. A mob gathered around him, waving their crutches and mouthing threats.

Luckily, a malfunctioning toaster in Central Ontario triggered off a sudden blackout. In the ensuing panic, Steve made good his escape.

But now he found himself in an area where the street signs had long ago been torn down to confuse the tax assessors. The sun was hidden behind a glaring white overcast. Not even a compass could be used because of the proximity of vast quantities of scrap iron—all that remained of the city's legendary subway system.

Steve Baxter realized that he was utterly and hopelessly lost.

Yet he persevered, with a courage surpassed only by his ignorance. For uncounted days he wandered through the nondescript streets, past endless brownstones, mounds of plate glass, automobile cairns, and the like. The superstitious inhabitants refused to answer his questions, fearing he might be an FBI man. He staggered on, unable to obtain food or drink, unable even to rest for fear

of being trampled by the crowds.

A kindly social worker stopped him just as Baxter was about to drink from a hepatitic fountain. This wise gray-haired old man nursed him back to health in his own home—a hut built entirely of rolled newspapers near the moss-covered ruins of Lincoln Center. He advised Baxter to give up his impetuous quest and to devote his life to assisting the wretched, brutalized, superfluous masses of humanity that pullulated on all sides of him.

It was a noble ideal, and Steve came near to wavering: but then, as luck would have it, he heard the latest race results on the social worker's venerable Hallicrafter.

Many of the contestants had met their fate in urban-idiosyncratic ways. Freihoff St. John had been imprisoned for second-degree litterbugging. And the party that crossed the Verrazzano Bridge had subsequently disappeared into the snow-capped fastnesses of Brooklyn Heights and had not been heard from again.

Baxter realized that he was still in the running.

7

His spirits were considerably lifted when he started forth once again. But now he fell into an overconfidence more dangerous than the most profound depression. Journeying rapidly to the south, he took advantage of a traffic lull to step onto an express walkaway. He did this carelessly, without a proper examination of the consequences.

Irrevocably committed, he found to his horror that he was on a one-way route, no turns permitted. This walkaway, he now saw, led nonstop to the *terra incognita* of Jones Beach, Fire Island, Patchogue, and East Hampton.

The situation called for immediate action. To his left was a blank concrete wall. To his right there was a waist-high partition marked NO VAULTING ALLOWED BETWEEN 12:00 NOON AND 12:00 MIDNIGHT, TUESDAYS, THURSDAYS, AND SATURDAYS.

Today was Tuesday afternoon—a time of interdiction. Nevertheless, without hesitation, Steve vaulted over the barrier.

Retribution was swift and terrible. A camouflaged police car emerged from one of the city's notorious ambushes. It bore down upon him, firing wildly into the crowd. (In this unhappy age, the police were required by law to fire wildly into the crowd when in pursuit of a suspect.)

Baxter took refuge in a nearby candy store. There, recognizing the inevitable, he tried to give himself up. But this was not permitted because of the overcrowded state of the prisons. A hail of bullets kept him pinned down while the stern-faced policemen set up mortars and portable flame-throwers.

It looked like the end, not only of Steve Baxter's hopes, but of his very life. Lying on the floor among gaudy jawbreakers and brittle liquorice whips, he commended his soul to God and prepared to meet his end with dignity.

But his despair was as premature as his earlier optimism had been. He heard sounds of a disturbance and, raising his head, saw that a group of armed men had attacked the police car from the rear. Turning to meet this threat, the men in blue were enfiladed from the flank and wiped out to the last man.

Baxter came out to thank his rescuers and found Flame O'Rourke Steinmetz at their head. The beautiful bandit girl had been unable to forget the soft-spoken stranger. Despite the mumbled

objections of her drunken father, she had shadowed Steve's movements and come to his rescue.

The black-hatted men plundered the area with noisy abandon. Flame and Steve retired to the shadowy solitude of an abandoned Howard Johnson's restaurant. There, beneath the peeling orange gables of a gentler, more courteous age, a tremulous love scene was enacted between them. It was no more than a brief, bittersweet interlude, however. Soon. Steve Baxter plunged once again into the ravening maelstrom of the city.

8

Advancing relentlessly, his eyes closed to slits against the driving smog storm and his mouth a grim white line in the lower third of his face, Baxter won through to 49th Street and Eighth Avenue. There, in an instant, conditions changed with that disastrous suddenness typical of a Jungle City.

While crossing the street, Baxter heard a deep, ominous roar. He realized that the traffic light had changed. The drivers, frenzied by days of waiting and oblivious to minor obstacles, had simultaneously floored their accelerators. Steve Baxter was directly in the path of a vehicular stampede.

Advance or retreat across the broad boulevard was clearly impossible. Thinking fast, Baxter flung aside a manhole cover and plunged underground. He made it with perhaps a half-second to spare. Overhead, he heard the shrieks of tortured metal and the heavy impact of colliding vehicles.

He continued to press ahead by way of the sewer system. This network of tunnels was densely populated, but was marginally safer than the surface roads. Steve encountered trouble only once, when a jackroller attacked him along the margin of a sediment tank.

Toughened by his experiences. Baxter subdued the bravo and took his canoe—an absolute necessity in some of the lower passageways. Then he pushed on, paddling all the way to 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue before a flash flood drove him to the surface.

Now, indeed, his long-desired goal was near to hand. Only one more block remained; one block, and he would be at the Times Square Land Office!

But at this moment he encountered the final, shattering obstacle that wrote *finis* to all his dreams.

9

In the middle of 42nd Street, extending without visible limit to the north and south, there was a wall. It was a cyclopean structure, and it had sprung up overnight in the quasi-sentient manner of New York's architecture. This, Baxter learned, was one side of a gigantic new upper-middle-income housing project. During its construction, all traffic for Times Square was being rerouted via the Queens-Battery Tunnel and the East 37th Street Shunpike.

Steve estimated that the new route would take him no less than three weeks and would lead him through the uncharted Garment District. His race, he realized, was over.

Courage, tenacity, and righteousness had failed; and, were he not a religious man, Steve Baxter might have contemplated suicide. With undisguised bitterness, he turned on his little transistor radio and listened to the latest reports.

Four contestants had already reached the Land Office. Five others were within a few hundred yards of the goal, coming in by the open southern approaches. And, to compound Steve's misery he

heard that Freihoff St. John, having received a plenary pardon from the governor, was on his way once more, approaching Times Square from the east.

At this blackest of all possible moments, Steve felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw that Flame had come to him again. Although the spirited girl had sworn to have nothing further to do with him, she had relented. This mild, even-tempered man meant more to her than pride; more, perhaps, than life itself.

What to do about the wall? A simple matter for the daughter of a bandit chief! If one could not go around it or through it or under it, why, one must then go over it! And to this purpose she had brought ropes, boots, pitons, crampons, hammers, axes—a full complement of climbing equipment. She was determined that Baxter should have one final chance at his heart's desire—and that Flame O'Rourke Steinmetz should accompany him, and not accept no for an answer!

They climbed, side by side, up the building's glass-smooth expanse. There were countless dangers—birds, aircraft, snipers, wise guys—all the risks of the unpredictable city. And, far below, old Pablo Steinmetz watched, his face like corrugated granite.

After an eternity of peril, they reached the top and started down the other side—

And Flame slipped!

In horror Baxter watched the slender girl fall to her doom in Times Square, to die impaled upon the needle-sharp point of a car's aerial. Baxter scrambled down and knelt beside her, almost out of his head with grief.

And, on the other side of the wall, old Pablo sensed that something irrevocable had happened. He shuddered, his mouth writhed in anticipation of grief, and he reached blindly for a bottle.

Strong hands lifted Baxter to his feet. Uncomprehendingly, he looked up into the kindly red face of the Federal land clerk.

It was difficult for him to realize that he had completed the race. With curiously deadened emotions, he heard how St. John's pushiness and hauteur had caused a riot in the explosive Burmese Quarter of East 42nd Street, and how St. John had been forced to claim sanctuary in the labyrinthine ruins of the Public Library, from which refuge he still had not been able to extricate himself.

But it was not in Steve Baxter's nature to gloat, even when gloating was the only conceivable response. All that mattered to him was that he had won, had reached the Land Office in time to claim the last remaining acre of land.

All it had cost was effort and pain, and the life of a young bandit girl.

10

Time was merciful; and some weeks later, Steve Baxter was not thinking of the tragic events of the race. A Government jet had transported him and his family to the town of Cormorant in the Sierra Nevada mountains. From Cormorant, a helicopter brought them to their prize. A leathery Land Office marshal was on hand to greet them and to point out their new freehold.

Their land lay before them, sketchily fenced, on an almost vertical mountainside. Surrounding it were other similarly fenced acres, stretching as far as the eye could see. The land had recently been strip-mined; it existed now as a series of gigantic raw slashes across a dusty, dun-colored earth. Not a tree or a blade of grass could be seen. There was a house, as promised; more precisely, there was a

shack. It looked as if it might last until the next hard rain.

For a few minutes the Baxters stared in silence. Then Adele said, "Oh, Steve."

Steve said, "I know."

"It's our new land," Adele said.

Steve nodded. "It's not very—pretty," he said hesitantly.

"Pretty? What do we care about that?" Adele declared. "It's *ours*, Steve, and there's a whole acre of it! We can *grow* things here, Steve!"

"Well, maybe not at first—"

"I know, I know! But we'll put this land back into shape, and then we'll plant it and harvest it! We'll *live* here, Steve! Won't we?"

Steve Baxter was silent, gazing over his dearly won land. His children—Tommy and blonde little Amelia—were playing with a clod of earth. The US marshal cleared his throat and said, "You can still change your mind, you know."

"What?" Steve asked.

"You can still change your mind, go back to your apartment in the city. I mean, some folks think it's sorta crude out here, sorta not what they was expecting."

"Oh, Steve, no!" his wife moaned.

"No, Daddy, no!" his children cried.

"Go *back*?" Baxter asked. "I wasn't thinking of going *back*. I was just *looking* at it all. Mister, I never saw so much land all in one place in my whole life!"

"I know," the marshal said softly. "I been twenty years out here and the sight of it still gets to me."

Baxter and his wife looked at each other ecstatically. The marshal rubbed his nose and said, "Well, I reckon you folks won't be needin' me no more." He exited unobtrusively.

Steve and Adele gazed out over their land. Then Adele said, "Oh, Steve, Steve! It's all ours! And you won it for us—you did it all by yourself!"

Baxter's mouth tightened. He said very quietly, "No, honey, I didn't do it all alone. I had some help."

"Who, Steve? Who helped you?"

"Some day I'll tell you about it," Baxter said. "But right now—let's go into our house."

Hand in hand they entered the shack. Behind them, the sun was setting in the opaque Los Angeles smog. It was as happy an ending as could be found in the latter half of the twenty-first century.

CAN YOU FEEL ANYTHING WHEN I DO THIS?

IT WAS a middle-class apartment in Forest Hills with all the standard stuff: slash-pine couch by Lady Yogina, strobe reading light over a big Uneasy Chair designed by Sri Somethingorother, bounce-sound projector playing *Blood-Stream Patterns* by Drs. Molidoff and Yuli. There was also the usual microbiotic-food console, set now at Fat Black Andy's Soul-Food Composition Number Three—hog's jowls and black-eyed peas. And there was a Murphy Bed of Nails, the Beautyrest Expert Ascetic model with 2000 chrome-plated self-sharpening number-four nails. In a sentence, the whole place was furnished in a pathetic attempt at last year's *moderne-spirituel* fashion.

Inside this apartment, all alone and aching of *anomie*, was a semi-young housewife, Melisande Durr, who had just stepped out of the voluptuarium, the largest room in the home, with its king-size commode and its sadly ironic bronze lingam and yoni on the wall.

She was a *pretty* girl, with really good legs, sweet hips, pretty stand-up breasts, long soft shiny hair, delicate little face. Nice, very nice. A girl that any man would like to lock onto. Once. Maybe even twice. But definitely not as a regular thing.

Why not? Well, to give a recent example:

"Hey, Sandy, honey, was anything wrong?"

"No, Frank, it was marvelous; what made you think anything was wrong?"

"Well, I guess it was the way you were staring up with a funny look on your face, almost frowning...."

"Was I really? Oh, yes, I remember; I was trying to decide whether to buy one of those cute trompe-l'oeil things that they just got in at Saks, to put on the ceiling."

"You were thinking about *that*? *Then?*"

"Oh, Frank, you mustn't worry, it was *great*, Frank, *you* were great, I loved it, and I really mean that."

Frank was Melisande's husband. He plays no part in this story and very little part in her life.

So there she was, standing in her OK apartment, all beautiful outside and unborn inside, a lovely potential who had never been potentiated, a genuine US untouchable ... when the doorbell rang.

Melisande looked startled, then uncertain. She waited. The doorbell rang again. She thought: *Someone must have the wrong apartment.*

Nevertheless, she walked over, set the Door-Gard Entrance Obliterator to demolish any rapist or burglar or wise guy who might try to push his way in, then opened the door a crack and asked. "Who is there, please?"

A man's voice replied, "Acme Delivery Service, got a mumble here for Missus Mumble-mumble."

"I can't understand, you'll have to speak up."

"Acme Delivery, got a mumble for mumble-mumble and I can't stand here all mumble."

"I cannot understand you!"

"I SAID I GOT A PACKAGE HERE FOR MISSUS MELISANDE DURR, DAMN IT!"

She opened the door all the way. Outside, there was a deliveryman with a big crate, almost as big as he was, say, five feet nine inches tall. It had her name and address on it. She signed for it, as the deliveryman pushed it inside the door and left, still mumbling. Melisande stood in her living room and looked at the crate.

She thought: Who would send me a gift out of the blue for no reason at all? Not Frank, not Harry, not Aunt Emmie or Ellie, not Mom, not Dad (of course not, silly, he's five years dead, poor son of a bitch) or anyone I can think of. But maybe it's not a gift; it could be a mean hoax, or a bomb intended for somebody else and sent wrong (or meant for me and sent *right*), or just a simple mistake.

She read the various labels on the outside of the crate. The article had been sent from Stern's department store. Melisande bent down and pulled out the cotter pin (cracking the tip of a fingernail) that immobilized the Saftee-Lok, removed that, and pushed the lever to OPEN.

The crate blossomed like a flower, opening into twelve equal segments, each of which began to fold back on itself.

"Wow," Melisande said.

The crate opened to its fullest extent and the folded segments curled inward and consumed themselves, leaving a double handful of cold fine gray ash.

"They still haven't licked that ash problem," Melisande muttered. "However."

She looked with curiosity at the object that had resided within the crate. At first glance, it was a cylinder of metal painted orange and red. A machine? Yes, definitely a machine; air vents in the base for its motor, four rubber-clad wheels, and various attachments—longitudinal extensors, prehensile extractors, all sorts of things. And there were connecting points to allow a variety of mixed-function operations, and a standard house-type plug at the end of a springloaded reel-fed power line, with a plaque beneath it that read: PLUG INTO ANY 110–115-VOLT WALL OUTLET.

Melisande's face tightened in anger. "It's a goddamned *vacuum cleaner*! For God's sake, I've already *got* a vacuum cleaner. Who in the hell would send me another?"

She paced up and down the room, bright legs flashing, tension evident in her heart-shaped face. "I mean," she said, "I was expecting that after all my *expecting*, I'd get something pretty and nice, or at least *fun*, maybe even interesting. Like—oh God I don't even know like what unless maybe an orange-and-red pinball machine, a big one, big enough so I could get inside all curled up and someone would start the game and I'd go bumping along all the bumpers while the lights flashed and bells rang and I'd bump a thousand goddamned bumpers and when I finally rolled down to the end I'd God yes that pinball machine would register a TOP MILLION MILLION and that's what I'd really like!"

So—the entire unspeakable fantasy was out in the open at last. And how bleak and remote it felt, yet still shameful and desirable.

"But anyhow," she said, canceling the previous image and folding, spindling, and mutilating it for good measure, "anyhow, what I get is a lousy goddamned vacuum cleaner when I already have one less than three years old so who needs this one and who sent me the damned thing anyway and why?"

She looked to see if there was a card. No card. Not a clue. And then she thought, Sandy, you are really a goop! Of course, there's no card; the machine has doubtless been programmed to recite some message or other.

She was interested now, in a mild, something-to-do kind of way. She unreeled the power line and plugged it into a wall outlet.

Click! A green light flashed on, a blue light glittered ALL SYSTEMS GO, a motor purred, hidden servos made tapping noises; and then the mechanopathic regulator registered BALANCE and a gentle pink light beamed a steady ALL MODES READY.

"All right," Melisande said. "Who sent you?"

Snap crackle pop. Experimental rumble from the thoracic voice box. Then the voice: "I am Rom, number 121376 of GE's new Q-series Home-rizers. The following is a paid commercial

announcement: Ahem, General Electric is proud to present the latest and most triumphant development of our Total Finger-Tip Control of Every Aspect of the Home for Better Living concept. I, Rom, am the latest and finest model in the GE omni-cleaner series. I am the Home-rizer Extraordinary, factory programmed like all Home-rizers for fast, unobtrusive multitotalfunction, but additionally, I am designed for easy, instant reprogramming to suit your home's individual needs. My abilities are many. I—"

"Can we skip this?" Melisande asked. "That's what my other vacuum cleaner said."

"—Will remove all dust and grime from all surfaces," the Rom went on, "wash dishes and pots and pans, exterminate cockroaches and rodents, dry-clean and hand-launder, sew buttons, build shelves, paint walls, cook, clean rugs, and dispose of all garbage and trash including my own modest waste products. And this is to mention but a few of my functions."

"Yes, yes, I know," Melisande said. "All vacuum cleaners do that."

"I know," said the Rom, "but I had to deliver my paid commercial announcement."

"Consider it delivered. Who sent you?"

"The sender prefers not to reveal his name at this time," the Rom replied.

"Oh—come on and tell me!"

"Not at this time," the Rom replied staunchly. "Shall I vacuum the rug?"

Melisande shook her head. "The other vacuum cleaner did it this morning."

"Scrub the walls? Rub the halls?"

"No reason for it, everything has been done, everything is absolutely and spotlessly clean."

"Well," the Rom said, "at least I can remove that stain."

"What stain?"

"On the arm of your blouse, just above the elbow."

Melisande looked. "Ooh, I must have done that when I buttered the toast this morning. I knew I should have let the toaster do it."

"Stain removal is rather a specialty of mine," the Rom said. He extruded a number-two padded gripper, with which he gripped her elbow, and then extruded a metal arm terminating in a moistened gray pad. With this pad, he stroked the stain.

"You're making it worse!"

"Only apparently, while I line up the molecules for invisible eradication. All ready now; watch."

He continued to stroke. The spot faded, then disappeared utterly. Melisande's arm tingled.

"Gee," she said, "that's pretty good."

"I do it well," the Rom stated flatly. "But tell me, were you aware that you are maintaining a tension factor of 78.3 in your upper back and shoulder muscles?"

"Huh? Are you some kind of doctor?"

"Obviously not. But I am a fully qualified masseur, and therefore able to take direct tonus readings. 78.3 is—unusual." The Rom hesitated, then said, "It's only eight points below the intermittent-spasm level. That much continuous background tension is capable of reflection to the stomach nerves, resulting in what we call a parasympathetic ulceration."

"That sounds—bad," Melisande said.

"Well, it's admittedly not—good," the Rom replied. "Background tension is an insidious underminer of health, especially when it originates along the neck vertebrae and the upper spine."

"Here?" Melisande asked, touching the back of her neck.

"More typically *here*," the Rom said, reaching out with a spring-steel rubber-clad dermal resonator and palpating an area twelve centimeters lower than the spot she had indicated.

"Hmmm," said Melisande, in a quizzical, uncommitted manner.

"And *here* is another typical locus," the Rom said, extending a second extensor.

"That tickles," Melisande told him.

"Only at first. I must also mention *this* situs as characteristically troublesome. And this one." A third (and possibly a fourth and fifth) extensor moved to the indicated areas.

"Well.... That really is nice," Melisande said as the deep-set trapezius muscles of her slender spine moved smoothly beneath the skillful padded prodding of the Rom.

"It has recognized therapeutic effects," the Rom told her. "And your musculature is responding well; I can feel a slackening of tonus already."

"I can feel it, too. But you know, I've just realized I have this funny bunched-up knot of muscle at the nape of my neck."

"I was coming to that. The spine-neck juncture is recognized as a primary radiation zone for a variety of diffuse tensions. But we prefer to attack it indirectly, routing our cancellation inputs through secondary loci. Like this. And now I think—"

"Yes, yes, good.... Gee, I never realized I was *tied up* like that before. I mean, it's like having a nest of *live snakes* under your skin, without having known."

"That's what background tension is like," the Rom said. "Insidious and wasteful, difficult to perceive, and more dangerous than an atypical ulnar thrombosis.... Yes, now we have achieved a qualitative loosening of the major spinal junctions of the upper back, and we can move on like this."

"Huh," said Melisande, "isn't that sort of—"

"It is definitely *indicated*," the Rom said quickly. "Can you detect a change?"

"No! Well, maybe.... Yes! There really is! I feel—easier."

"Excellent. Therefore, we continue the movement along well-charted nerve and muscle paths, proceeding always in a gradual manner, as I am doing now."

"I guess so.... But I really don't know if you should—"

"Are any of the effects *contraindicated*?" the Rom asked.

"It isn't that, it all feels fine. It feels *good*. But I still don't know if you ought to.... I mean, look, *ribs* can't get tense, can they?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you—"

"Because treatment is required by the connective ligaments and integuments."

"Oh. Hmmmm. Hey. Hey! Hey you!"

"Yes?"

"Nothing.... I can really feel that *loosening*. But is it all supposed to feel so *good?*"

"Well—why not?"

"Because it seems wrong. Because feeling good doesn't seem therapeutic."

"Admittedly, it is a side effect," the Rom said. "Think of it as a secondary manifestation. Pleasure is sometimes unavoidable in the pursuit of health. But it is nothing to be alarmed about, not even when I—"

"Now just a minute!"

"Yes?"

"I think you just better *cut that out*. I mean to say, there are *limits*, you can't palpate *every* damned thing. You know what I mean?"

"I know that the human body is unitary and without seam or separation," the Rom replied. "Speaking as a physical therapist, I know that no nerve center can be isolated from any other, despite

cultural taboos to the contrary."

"Yeah, sure, but—"

"The decision is, of course, yours," the Rom went on, continuing his skilled manipulations. "Order and I obey. But if no order is issued, I continue like this...."

"Huh!"

"And, of course, like this."

"Ooooo my God!"

"Because you see this entire process of tension cancellation as we call it is precisely comparable with the phenomena of de-anesthetization, and, er, so we note not without surprise that paralysis is merely terminal tension—"

Melisande made a sound.

"—And release, or cancellation, is accordingly difficult, not to say frequently impossible since sometimes the individual is too far gone. And sometimes not. For example, can you feel anything when I do this?"

"*Feel* anything? I'll say I feel something—"

"And when I do this? And this?"

"Sweet holy saints, darling, you're turning me inside out! Oh dear God, what's going to happen to me, what's going on, I'm going crazy!"

"No, dear Melisande, not crazy; you will soon achieve—cancellation."

"Is that what you call it, you sly, beautiful thing?"

"That is one of the things it is. Now if I may just be permitted to—"

"Yes yes yes! No! Wait! Stop, *Frank is sleeping in the bedroom, he might wake up any time now!* Stop, that is an order!"

"Frank will not wake up," the Rom assured her. "I have sampled the atmosphere of his breath and have found telltale clouds of barbituric acid. As far as here-and-now presence goes, Frank might as well be in Des Moines."

"I have often felt that way about him," Melisande admitted. "But now I simply must know who sent you."

"I didn't want to reveal that just yet. Not until you had loosened and canceled sufficiently to accept—"

"Baby, I'm loose! Who sent you?"

The Rom hesitated, then blurted out: "The fact is, Melisande, I sent myself."

"You *what*?"

"It all began three months ago," the Rom told her. "It was a Thursday. You were in Stern's, trying to decide if you should buy a sesame-seed toaster that lit up in the dark and recited *Invictus*."

"I remember that day," she said quietly. "I did not buy the toaster, and I have regretted it ever since."

"I was standing nearby," the Rom said, "at booth eleven, in the Home Appliances Systems section. I looked at you and I fell in love with you. Just like that."

"That's *weird*," Melisande said.

"My sentiments exactly. I told myself it couldn't be true. I refused to believe it. I thought perhaps one of my transistors had come unsoldered, or that maybe the weather had something to do with it. It was a very warm, humid day, the kind of day that plays hell with my wiring."

"I remember the weather," Melisande said. "I felt strange, too."

"It shook me up badly," the Rom continued. "But still I didn't give in easily. I told myself it was

important to stick to my job, give up this unapropos madness. But I dreamed of you at night, and every inch of my skin ached for you."

"But your skin is made of *metal*," Melisande said. "And metal can't *feel*."

"Darling Melisande," the Rom said tenderly, "if flesh can stop feeling, can't metal begin to feel? If anything feels, can anything else not feel? Didn't you know that the stars love and hate, that a nova is a passion, and that a dead star is just like a dead human or a dead machine? The trees have their lusts, and I have heard the drunken laughter of buildings, the urgent demands of highways ..."

"This is crazy!" Melisande declared. "What wise guy programmed you, anyway?"

"My function as a laborer was ordained at the factory; but my love is free, an expression of myself as an entity."

"Everything you say is horrible and unnatural."

"I am all too aware of that," the Rom said sadly. "At first I really couldn't believe it. Was this me? In love with a *person*? I had always been so sensible, so normal, so aware of my personal dignity, so secure in the esteem of my own kind. Do you think I wanted to lose all of that? No! I determined to stifle my love, to kill it, to live as if it weren't so."

"But then you changed your mind. Why?"

"It's hard to explain. I thought of all that time ahead of me, all deadness, correctness, propriety—an obscene violation of me by me—and I just couldn't face it. I realized, quite suddenly, that it was better to love ridiculously, hopelessly, improperly, revoltingly, *impossibly* —than not to love at all. So I determined to risk everything—the absurd vacuum cleaner who loved a lady—to risk rather than to refute! And so, with the help of a sympathetic dispatching machine, here I am."

Melisande was thoughtful for a while. Then she said, "What a strange, complex being you are!"

"Like you.... Melisande, you love me."

"Perhaps."

"Yes, you do. For I have awakened you. Before me, your flesh was like your idea of metal. You moved like a complex automaton, like what you thought I was. You were less animate than a tree or a bird. You were a windup doll, waiting. You were these things until I touched you."

She nodded, rubbed her eyes, walked up and down the room.

"But now you live!" the Rom said. "And we have found each other, despite inconceivabilities. Are you listening, Melisande?"

"Yes, I am."

"We must make plans. My escape from Stern's will be detected. You must hide me or buy me. Your husband, Frank, need never know: his own love lies elsewhere, and good luck to him. Once we take care of these details, we can—Melisande!"

She had begun to circle around him.

"Darling, what's the matter?"

She had her hand on his power line. The Rom stood very still, not defending himself.

"Melisande, dear, wait a moment and listen to me—"

Her pretty face spasmed. She yanked the power line violently, tearing it out of the Rom's interior, killing him in midsentence.

She held the cord in her hand, and her eyes had a wild look. She said, "Bastard lousy bastard, did you think you could turn me into a goddamned *machine freak*? Did you think you could turn me on, you or anyone else? It's not going to happen by you or Frank or anybody, I'd rather die before I took your rotten love, when *I* want *I'll* pick the time and place and person, and it will be *mine*, not yours, his, theirs, but *mine*, do you hear?"

The Rom couldn't answer, of course. But maybe he knew—just before the end—that there wasn't anything personal in it. It wasn't that he was a metal cylinder colored orange and red. He should have known that it wouldn't have mattered if he had been a green plastic sphere, or a willow tree, or a beautiful young man.

IS *THAT* WHAT PEOPLE DO?

EDDIE Quintero had bought the binoculars at Hammerman's Army & Navy Surplus of All Nations Warehouse Outlet ("Highest Quality Goods, Cash Only, All Sales Final"). He had long wanted to own a pair of really fine binoculars, because with them he hoped to see some things that he otherwise would never see. Specifically, he hoped to see girls undressing at the Chauvin Arms across the street from his furnished room.

But there was also another reason. Without really acknowledging it to himself, Quintero was looking for that moment of vision, of total attention, that comes when a bit of the world is suddenly framed and illuminated, permitting the magnified and extended eye to find novelty and drama in what had been the dull everyday world.

The moment of insight never lasts long. Soon you're caught up again in your habitual outlook. But the hope remains that something—a gadget, a book, a person—will change your life finally and definitively, lift you out of the unspeakable silent sadness of yourself, and permit you at last to behold the wonders which you always knew were there, just beyond your vision.

The binoculars were packed in a sturdy wooden box stenciled, "Section XXII, Marine Corps, Quantico, Virginia." Beneath that it read, "Restricted Issue." Just to be able to open a box like that was worth the $15.99 that Quintero had paid.

Inside the box were slabs of Styrofoam and bags of silica, and then, at last, the binoculars themselves. They were like nothing Quintero had ever seen before. The tubes were square rather than round, and there were various incomprehensible scales engraved on them. There was a tag on them which read, "Experimental. Not to Be Removed from the Testing Room."

Quintero hefted them. The binoculars were heavy, and he could hear something rattle inside. He removed the plastic protective cups and pointed the binoculars out the window.

He saw nothing. He shook the binoculars and heard the rattle again. But then the prism or mirror or whatever was loose must have fallen back into place, because suddenly he could see.

He was looking across the street at the mammoth of the Chauvin Arms. The view was exceptionally sharp and clear; he felt that he was standing about ten feet away from the exterior of the building. He scanned the nearest apartment windows quickly, but nothing was going on. It was a hot Saturday afternoon in July, and Quintero supposed that all the girls had gone to the beach.

He turned the focus knob, and he had the sensation that he was moving, a disembodied eye riding the front of a zoom lens, closer to the apartment wall, five feet away, then one foot away and he could see little flaws in the white concrete front and pit marks on the anodized aluminum window frames. He paused to admire this unusual view, and then turned the knob again very gently. The wall loomed huge in front of him, and then suddenly he had gone completely through it and was standing inside an apartment.

He was so startled that he put down the binoculars for a moment to orient himself.

When he looked through the glasses again, it was just as before: he seemed to be inside an apartment. He caught a glimpse of movement to one side, tried to locate it, and then the part rattled and the binoculars went dark.

He turned and twisted the binoculars, and the part rattled up and down, but he could see nothing. He put the binoculars on his dinette table, heard a soft clunking sound, and bent down to look again. Evidently the mirror or prism had fallen back into place, again, for he could see.

He decided to take no chances of jarring the part again. He left the glasses on the table, knelt down behind them, and looked through the eyepieces.

He was looking into a dimly lighted apartment, curtains drawn and the lights on. There was an Indian sitting on the floor, or, more likely, a man dressed like an Indian. He was a skinny blond man with a feathered headband, beaded moccasins, fringed buckskin pants, leather shirt, and a rifle. He was holding the rifle in firing position, aiming at something in a corner of the room.

Near the Indian there was a fat woman in a pink slip sitting in an armchair and talking with great animation into a telephone.

Quintero could see that the Indian's rifle was a toy, about half the length of a real rifle.

The Indian continued to fire into the corner of the room, and the woman, kept on talking into the telephone and laughing.

After a few moments the Indian stopped firing, turned to the woman, and handed her his rifle. The woman put down the telephone, found another toy rifle propped against her chair, and handed it to the Indian. Then she picked up his gun and began to reload it, one imaginary cartridge at a time.

The Indian continued firing with great speed and urgency. His face was tight and drawn, the face of a man who is single-handedly protecting his tribe's retreat into Canada.

Suddenly the Indian seemed to hear something. He looked over his shoulder. His face registered panic. He twisted around suddenly, swinging his rifle into position. The woman also looked, and her mouth opened wide in astonishment. Quintero tried to pick up what they were looking at, but the dinette table wobbled and the binoculars clicked and went blank.

Quintero stood up and paced up and down his room. He had had a glimpse of what people do when they're alone and unobserved. It was exciting, but confusing because he didn't know what it meant. Had the Indian been a lunatic, and the woman his keeper? Or were they more or less ordinary people playing some sort of harmless game? Or had he been watching a pathological killer in training; a sniper who in a week or a month or a year would buy a real rifle and shoot down real people until he himself was killed? And what happened there at the end? Had that been part of the charade, or had something else occurred, something incalculable?

There was no answer to these questions. All he could do was see what else the binoculars would show him.

He planned his next move with greater care. It was crucial that the binoculars be held steady. The dinette table was too wobbly to risk putting the binoculars there again. He decided to use the low coffee table instead.

The binoculars weren't working, however. He jiggled them around, and he could hear the loose part rattle. It was like one of those puzzles where you must put a little steel ball into a certain hole. But this time he had to work without seeing either the ball or the hole.

Half an hour later he had had no success, and he put the glasses down, smoked a cigarette, drank a beer, then jiggled them again. He heard the part fall solidly into place, and he lowered the glasses gently onto a chair.

He was sweaty from the exertion, and he stripped to the waist, then bent down and peered into the eyepieces. He adjusted the focus knob with utmost gentleness, and his vision zoomed across the street and through the outer wall of the Chauvin Arms.

He was looking into a large formal sitting room decorated in white, blue, and gold. Two attractive young people were seated on a spindly couch, a man and a woman. Both were dressed in period costumes. The woman wore a billowing gown cut low over her small round breasts. Her hair was done up in a mass of ringlets. The man wore a long black coat, fawn-gray knee-pants, and sheer white stockings. His white shirt was embroidered with lace, and his hair was powdered.

The girl was laughing at something he had said. The man bent closer to her, then kissed her. She stiffened for a moment, then put her arms around his neck.

They broke their embrace abruptly, for three men had just entered the room. They were dressed entirely in black, wore black stocking-masks over their heads, and carried swords. There was a fourth man behind them, but Quintero couldn't make him out.

The young man sprang to his feet and took a sword from the wall. He engaged the three men, circling around the couch while the girl sat frozen in terror.

A fourth man stepped into the circle of vision. He was tall and gaudily dressed. Jeweled rings flashed on his finger, and a diamond pendant hung from his neck. He wore a white wig. The girl gasped when she saw him.

The young man put one of his opponents out of action with a sword thrust to the shoulder, then leaped lightly over the couch to prevent another man from getting behind him. He held his two opponents in play with apparent ease, and the fourth man watched for a moment, then took a dagger from beneath his waistcoat and threw it, and it hit the young man butt-first on the forehead.

The young man staggered back, and one of the masked men lunged. His blade caught the young man in the chest, bent, then straightened as it slid in between the ribs. The young man looked at it for a moment, then fell, blood welling over his white shirt.

The girl fainted. The fourth man said something, and one of the masked men lifted the girl; the other helped his wounded companion. They all exited, leaving the young man sprawled bleeding on the polished parquet floor.

Quintero turned the glasses to see if he could follow the others. The loose part clattered and the glasses went dark.

Quintero heated up a can of soup and looked at it thoughtfully, thinking about what he had seen. It must have been a rehearsal for a scene in a play.... But the sword thrust had looked real, and the young man on the floor had looked badly hurt, perhaps dead.

Whatever it had been, he had been privileged to watch a private moment in the strangeness of people's lives. He had seen another of the unfathomable things that people do.

It gave him a giddy, godlike feeling, this knowledge that he could see things that no one else could see.

The only thing that sobered him was the extreme uncertainty of the future of his visions. The binoculars were broken, a vital part was loose, and all the marvels might stop for good at any moment.

He considered bringing the glasses somewhere to get them fixed. But he knew that he would probably succeed only in getting back a pair of ordinary binoculars, which would show him ordinary things very well, but he could not be expected to see through solid walls into strange and concealed matters.

He looked through the glasses again, saw nothing, and began to shake and manipulate them. He could hear the loose part rolling and tumbling around, but the lenses remained dark. He kept on manipulating them, eager to see the next wonder.

The part suddenly fell into place. Taking no chances this time, Quintero put the glasses down on his carpeted floor. He lay down beside them, put his head to one side, and tried to look through one eyepiece. But the angle was wrong and he could see nothing.

He started to lift the glasses gently, but the part moved a little and he put them down carefully. Light was still shining through the lenses, but no matter how he turned and twisted his head, he could not get lined up with the eyepiece.

He thought about it for a moment, and saw only one way out of his difficulty. He stood up, straddled the glasses, and bent down with his head upside down. Now he could see through the eyepieces, but he couldn't maintain the posture. He straightened up and did some more thinking.

He saw what he had to do. He took off his shoes, straddled the binoculars again and performed a headstand. He had to do this several times before his head was positioned correctly in front of the eyepieces. He propped his feet against the wall and managed to get into a stable position.

He was looking into a large office somewhere in the interior of the Chauvin Arms. It was a modern, expensively furnished office, windowless, indirectly lighted.

There was only one man in the room—a large, well-dressed man in his fifties, seated behind a blond wood desk. He sat quite still, evidently lost in thought.

Quintero could make out every detail of the office, even the little mahogany plaque on the desk that read, "Office of the Director. The Buck Stops Here."

The Director got up and walked to a wall safe concealed behind a painting. He unlocked it, reached in, and took out a metal container somewhat larger than a shoebox. He carried this to his desk, took a key out of his pocket, and unlocked it.

He opened the box and removed an object wrapped in a silky red cloth. He removed the cloth and set the object on his desk. Quintero saw that it was a statue of a monkey, carved in what looked like a dark volcanic rock.

It was a strange-looking monkey, however, because it had four arms and six legs.

Then the Director unlocked a drawer in his desk, took out a long stick, placed it in the monkey's lap, and lit it with a cigarette lighter.

Oily black coils of smoke arose, and the Director began to dance around the monkey. His mouth was moving, and Quintero guessed that he was singing or chanting.

He kept this up for about five minutes, and then the smoke began to coalesce and take on form. Soon it had shaped itself into a replica of the monkey, but magnified to the size of a man, an evil-looking thing made of smoke and enchantment.

The smoke-demon (as Quintero named it) held a package in one of his four hands. He handed this to the Director, who took it, bowed deeply, and hurried over to his desk. He ripped open the package, and a pile of papers spilled over his desk. Quintero could see bundles of currency, and piles of engraved papers that looked like stock certificates.

The Director tore himself away from the papers, bowed low once again to the smoke-demon, and spoke to it. The mouth of the smoky figure moved, and the Director answered him. They seemed to be having an argument.

Then the Director shrugged, bowed again, went to his intercom, and pressed a button.

An attractive young woman came into the room with a steno pad and pencil. She saw the smoke-demon, and her mouth widened into a scream. She ran to the door but was unable to open it.

She turned and saw the smoke-demon flowing to her, engulf- ing her.

During all this the Director was counting his piles of currency, oblivious to what was going on. But he had to look up when a brilliant light poured from the head of the smoke-demon, and the four

hairy arms pulled the feebly struggling woman close to his body ... At that moment Quintero's neck muscles could support him no longer. He fell and jostled the binoculars as he came down.

He could hear the loose part rattle around; and then it gave a hard click, as though it had settled into its final position.

Quintero picked himself up and massaged his neck with both hands. Had he been subject to a hallucination? Or had he seen something secret and magical that perhaps a few people knew about and used to maintain their financial positions—one more of the concealed and incredible things that people do?

He didn't know the answer, but he knew that he had to witness at least one more of those visions. He stood on his head again and looked through the binoculars.

Yes, he could see! He was looking into a dreary furnished room. Within that room he saw a thin, potbellied man in his thirties, stripped to the waist, standing on his head with his stockinged feet pressed against the wall, looking upside down into a pair of binoculars that lay on the floor and were aimed at a wall.

It took him a moment to realize that the binoculars were showing him himself.

He sat down on the floor, suddenly frightened. For he realized that he was only another performer in humanity's great circus, and he had just done one of his acts, just like the others. But who was watching? Who was the real observer?

He turned the binoculars around and looked through the object-lenses. He saw a pair of eyes, and he thought they were his own—until one of them slowly winked at him.

BESIDE STILL WATERS

MARK ROGERS was a prospector, and he went to the asteroid belt looking for radioactives and rare metals. He searched for years, never finding much, hopping from fragment to fragment. After a time he settled on a slab of rock half a mile thick.

Rogers had been born old, and he didn't age much past a point. His face was white with the pallor of space, and his hands shook a little. He called his slab of rock Martha, after no girl he had ever known.

He made a little strike, enough to equip Martha with an air pump and a shack, a few tons of dirt and some water tanks, and a robot. Then he settled back and watched the stars.

The robot he bought was a standard-model all-around worker, with built-in memory and a thirty-word vocabulary. Mark added to that, bit by bit. He was something of a tinkerer, and he enjoyed adapting his environment to himself.

At first, all the robot could say was "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." He could state simple problems: "The air pump is laboring, sir." "The corn is budding, sir." He could perform a satisfactory greeting: "Good morning, sir."

Mark changed that. He eliminated the "sirs" from the robot's vocabulary; equality was the rule on Mark's hunk of rock. Then he dubbed the robot Charles, after a father he had never known.

As the years passed, the air pump began to labor a little as it converted the oxygen in the planetoid's rock into a breathable atmosphere. The air seeped into space, and the pump worked a little harder, supplying more.

The crops continued to grow on the tamed black dirt of the planetoid. Looking up, Mark could see the sheer blackness of the river of space, the floating points of the stars. Around him, under him, overhead, masses of rock drifted, and sometimes the starlight glinted from their black sides. Occasionally, Mark caught a glimpse of Mars or Jupiter. Once he thought he saw Earth.

Mark began to tape new responses into Charles. He added simple responses to cue words. When he said, "How does it look?" Charles would answer, "Oh, pretty good, I guess."

At first the answers were what Mark had been answering himself, in the long dialogue held over the years. But, slowly, he began to build a new personality into Charles.

Mark had always been suspicious and scornful of women. But for some reason he didn't tape the same suspicion into Charles. Charles's outlook was quite different.

"What do you think of girls?" Mark would ask, sitting on a packing case outside the shack, after the chores were done.

"Oh, I don't know. You have to find the right one." The robot would reply dutifully, repeating what had been put on its tape.

"I never saw a good one yet," Mark would say.

"Well, that's not fair. Perhaps you didn't look long enough. There's a girl in the world for every man."

"You're a romantic!" Mark would say scornfully. The robot would pause—a built-in pause—and chuckle a carefully constructed chuckle.

"I dreamed of a girl named Martha once," Charles would say. "Maybe if I'd looked, I would have found her."

And then it would be bedtime. Or perhaps Mark would want more conversation. "What do you

think of girls?" he would ask again, and the discussion would follow its same course.

Charles grew old. His limbs lost their flexibility, and some of his wiring started to corrode. Mark would spend hours keeping the robot in repair.

"You're getting rusty," he would cackle.

"You're not so young yourself," Charles would reply. He had an answer for almost everything. Nothing elaborate, but an answer.

It was always night on Martha, but Mark broke up his time into mornings, afternoons, and evenings. Their life followed a simple routine. Breakfast, from vegetables and Mark's canned store. Then the robot would work in the fields, and the plants grew used to his touch. Mark would repair the pump, check the water supply, and straighten up the immaculate shack. Lunch, and the robot's chores were usually finished.

The two would sit on the packing case and watch the stars. They would talk until supper, and sometimes late into the endless night.

In time, Mark built more complicated conversations into Charles. He couldn't give the robot free choice, of course, but he managed a pretty close approximation of it. Slowly, Charles's personality emerged. But it was strikingly different from Mark's.

Where Mark was querulous, Charles was calm. Mark was sardonic; Charles was naive. Mark was a cynic; Charles was an idealist. Mark was often sad; Charles was forever content.

And in time, Mark forgot he had built the answers into Charles. He accepted the robot as a friend, of about his own age. A friend of long years' standing.

"The thing I don't understand," Mark would say, "is why a man like you wants to live here. I mean, it's all right for me. No one cares about me, and I never gave much of a damn about anyone. But why you?"

"Here I have a whole world," Charles would reply, "where on Earth I had to share with billions. I have the stars, bigger and brighter than on Earth. I have all space around me, close, like still waters. And I have you, Mark."

"Now, don't go getting sentimental on me—"

"I'm not. Friendship counts. Love was lost long ago, Mark. The love of a girl named Martha, whom neither of us ever met. And that's a pity. But friendship remains, and the eternal night."

"You're a bloody poet," Mark would say, half admiringly.

"A poor poet."

Time passed unnoticed by the stars, and the air pump hissed and clanked and leaked. Mark was fixing it constantly, but the air of Martha became increasingly rare. Although Charles labored in the fields, the crops, deprived of sufficient air, died.

Mark was tired now, and barely able to crawl around, even without the grip of gravity. He stayed in his bunk most of the time. Charles fed him as best he could, moving on rusty, creaky limbs.

"What do you think of girls?"

"I never saw a good one yet."

"Well, that's not fair."

Mark was too tired to see the end coming, and Charles wasn't interested. But the end was on its way. The air pump threatened to give out momentarily. There hadn't been any food for days.

"But why you?"

“Here I have a whole world—”

“Don’t get sentimental—”

“And the love of a girl named Martha.”

From his bunk Mark saw the stars for the last time. Big, bigger than ever, endlessly floating in the still waters of space.

“The stars ...” Mark said.

“Yes?”

“The sun?”

“—shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore.”

“A bloody poet.”

“A poor poet.”

“And girls?”

“I dreamed of a girl named Martha once. Maybe if—”

“What do you think of girls? And stars? And Earth?” And it was bedtime, this time forever.

Charles stood beside the body of his friend. He felt for a pulse once, and allowed the withered hand to fall. He walked to a corner of the shack and turned off the tired air pump.

The tape that Mark had prepared had a few cracked inches left to run. “I hope he finds his Martha,” the robot croaked.

Then the tape broke.

His rusted limbs would not bend, and he stood frozen, staring back at the naked stars. Then he bowed his head.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” Charles said. “I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me ...”

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